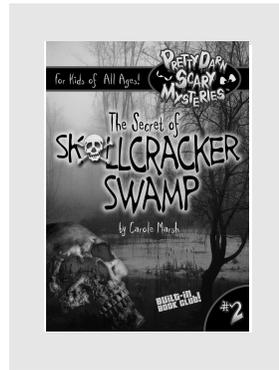


## Teacher's Guide for:

# The Secret of Skullcracker Swamp

### A Word From Carole Marsh

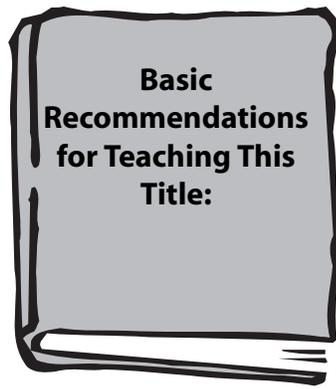


One summer, my husband, Bob, and I (the character "Papa" for those of you who read my state- and country-based Carole Marsh Mysteries!) decided to go to the Okefenokee Swamp. Well, we found out that it's a place you don't really go "to," exactly. You go near it, right up to it, but to actually get into the enormous swamp, you need to be an alligator...or take a boat trip.

We often read about the "environment," as if it was a thing, but if you go to the Okefenokee, you'll see an example of an environment that is a very special place. In this day and time, I think it's a treat for anyone to visit a place where you can look far and wide and not see any man-made things. The Okefenokee was many things to me: spooky, scary, green, sunny, hot, changing, peaceful, itchy (mosquitoes), noisily silent (listen closely and you can hear many things), and surprising. One of the biggest surprises was that the Atlanta Symphony traipsed all the way down there to play in the swamp (the state park part). I just couldn't help but wonder if all the swamp creatures enjoyed the music as much as we "swampers" did?!

I hope you are enjoying your trip through the Okefenokee!





- Because of the short chapters with intriguing endings, this book is a good choice to read aloud in class.
- Consider using some of the topics below to discuss after the chapter where the subject matter is mentioned.
- Ask students to select a subject for a short written essay, oral report, or a project. They can work in teams if you prefer. Subjects might include:

**Animals and birds living in the swamp:** The Okefenokee Swamp boasts a diverse and fascinating array of animals and birds. What animals can be found in the swamp? What birds can be found in the swamp? What is most interesting about them? How do they adapt to their environment? You might want students to pick an animal or a bird, and prepare a short presentation on it.

**The American alligator, its habitat, and just how dangerous it is:** Relate this to current news items about alligators on golf courses and in lakes, or about alligator attacks on pets and people. Why are such encounters growing more common as humans encroach on alligator habitats? Alligators were once an endangered species; are they today?

**“Hollerin’” in the swamp:** Why did swampers holler? Sometimes it was a shout of sheer joy, and other times a holler was an important form of communication. How did a holler carry so far in the swamp? See what you can find out about the annual “hollerin’ contest” in Spivey’s Corner, North Carolina.

**Swamp words—a “swampy” language:** Swampers had their own way of saying things, that’s for sure! Why do people speak differently in different regions? Write some of the following expressions on the board, and have fun trying to figure out how they came about. Then, ask volunteers to use them in a sentence.

’maters (tomatoes)	disremember (forget)
fixing (ready to do something)	grabble (to dig or scratch the earth)
noseling (to sniff)	shivers (splinters of wood)

**The history of swamp fires in the Okefenokee** Major fires swept through the swamp in 1844, 1932, 1954 and 1955. What does fire do for a swamp? Discuss how fire is a necessary part of the swamp ecosystem, as it stops trees from growing too much and taking over the swamp. Fire also releases nutrients from vegetation, and helps the swamp grow!



## There's More To Know!

Once you start digging, you find so many interesting details about people, places, and things! Here are some things to share with your students about the Okefenokee Swamp:

- The water in the Okefenokee Swamp is brown, but it is safe to drink! The water is stained by tannic acid from decaying vegetation, but has a very good taste. The trees and plants in the swamp actually clean the water before it ends up in the Gulf of Mexico and the Intercoastal Waterway. Sailing ships used to stock up on water from the St. Mary's River, which stayed fresh during long voyages.
- What sounds do you think you would hear in a swamp? You'll hear the bellow of alligators...the hooting of owls...the croaking and singing of more than 20 species of toads and frogs! Swampers say the sandhill crane has the most distinctive sound of all—it's described as a loud rattle, honk, bugle, or trumpet sound! Go to <http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/resource/birds/cranemov/sounds/sounds.htm> to hear the memorable sound of the sandhill crane!
- When Indian tribes were battling American settlers in the early 1800s, a group of Seminole Indians escaped to the Okefenokee Swamp. Their Indian leader, Bolek, became known as "Billy Bowlegs." The Indians thrived in the swamp for 20 years, and took in many escaped slaves from Southern states. Eventually, the Indians were driven out, ending up in the Florida Everglades.
- Sometimes, a good idea can backfire on you! Francis Harper was a naturalist who came to love the Okefenokee Swamp and the people who lived there. In the 1930s, he became concerned about developers ruining the swamp. His wife Jean, who had been a tutor for President Franklin Roosevelt, convinced the president to protect the swamp by making it a national wildlife refuge. But once the swamp was managed by the government, the people living there were no longer allowed to kill the bears and bobcats that often attacked their animals. Many swampers had to leave the area because they could not support themselves in the swamp any longer!
- How does the swamp grow and rejuvenate? In the swamp, vegetation grows faster than it decays. As it dies and sinks, forming peat, it breaks down and produces methane gas. The gas eventually causes big layers of peat to come to the water's surface. This is called a "blowup." Plants grow on the blowup, and it is then called a "battery." When trees grow on the battery, it becomes an island. Walking on these islands and batteries has been described "like walking on a waterbed." That must have been why the Indians named the swamp the Okefenokee—"the land of the trembling earth!"

## **Bibliography, Other Resources and Ideas!**

- The book, “Okefenokee Album,” is a loving tribute to the swamp by the naturalist Francis Harper. Georgia Southern University professor Delma Presley completed the book for publication when Harper died before it was finished. Harper describes the people, the sounds, the smells, and the very essence of the Okefenokee in this fascinating volume.
- I would also recommend “The Longstreet Highroad Guide to the Georgia Coast & Okefenokee,” by Richard J. Lenz. The author describes the history of the swamp, the animals, birds, and plants inhabiting it, the state parks and wildlife refuge, and the lifeblood of the swamp—the Suwannee River.

Experience the Okefenokee! If you can’t schedule a field trip to any of these destinations, check them out on the Internet:

### **State Parks, Wildlife Areas, Recreation Areas**

- Okefenokee Heritage Center and Southern Forest World  
Exhibits about swamp life and local history, including the impact of timbering and the naval stores industry on Georgia.
- Okefenokee Swamp Park  
Nature trails and boardwalks wind through the park, where visitors view animals in their natural habitat, a pioneer homestead, and a Seminole Indian village.
- Suwannee Canal Recreation Area  
Explore the swamp by foot, car, bike, boat, or guided nature tour!
- Stephen C. Foster State Park  
This 80-acre state park is located within a national wildlife refuge loaded with flora and fauna!

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