

Public Lands Profile: Big Dukes Pond



Beautiful, But No Walk in the Park

Spring rains are eagerly greeted by the colony of wood storks at Big Dukes Pond Wildlife Management Area in southeastern Georgia. The rains fill the Carolina bay beneath the birds, helping guard their nests from predators. Higher water makes it harder for critters like raccoons to reach the tall pond cypress trees where the storks nest. More water also encourages alligators to hang around, another deterrent to predators!

Yet, dry springs like this year's make for difficult nesting conditions. About 145 wood stork nests were counted at the WMA during a recent aerial survey. There have been as many as 330, a count recorded in 1993.

Big Dukes is a unique, 1,692-acre conservation area northwest of Millen. It was purchased in 1999 and expanded by a donation from The Nature Conservancy in 2005. The most striking ecological feature is a Carolina bay, an unusual wetland ecosystem unique to the southeastern Coastal Plain. A number of habitats are found here – pond cypress swamp, pond cypress savanna, slash pine-mixed hardwoods, bay swamp and sandhill scrub communities. These offer great habitat for a diversity of plants and animals. Two endangered species are found at Big Dukes: the wood stork and a small population of Canby's dropwort.

The area is remote and rugged. There is no infrastructure onsite. Access to the different habitats is by old logging roads now open only to foot traffic. Water conditions in the bay vary throughout the year, so be ready to get wet if you venture into the wetland. It is important that hunters and other visitors do not enter the wood stork rookery during breeding season, February through July. A buffer area is posted around the rookery.

As you walk the "sand rim" road along the edge of the wetland and the "criss-cross" road on the interior of the bay, you may hear a chorus of southern leopard frogs, a quacking, crackling call that can be pretty variable. If you're really lucky, you may glimpse a spotted turtle as she looks for a suitable nesting site: But you'd have to be pretty lucky because these are rare and very secretive creatures.

Birds at Big Dukes are plentiful and diverse, thanks to the varied habitats. Wood storks soar overhead with their distinctive black and white wings. At the northern end of the criss-cross road that takes you to the middle of the bay, you find yourself in an open pond cypress savanna, perfect habitat for the Canby's dropwort. This small perennial herb has very specific habitat requirements.

The scattered majestic cypress trees make an open canopy, allowing plenty of light to reach the ground. Grasses and herbs abound beside the rare dropwort. Management of the site includes restoring the natural hydrology and fire regimes and removing off-site pines. These actions will move the species compositions toward a more natural level, benefiting the rare species and natural communities as well as other wildlife.

In the uplands, the pine plantation is slowly being converted to longleaf pine through thinning, prescribed fire and planting of longleaf. A long-term monitoring study has been set up to drive adaptive management.

From uplands to wetlands and in every season, you'll find that Big Dukes Pond is a unique experience.