

Great Dismal Swamp is not a dismal place at all

By Holmes Rolston III
For the Coloradoan

So that's Lake Drummond in the middle of the Great Dismal Swamp.

I made it thanks to a lot of paddling and thanks to George Washington. This swamp is Virginia's equivalent of the Okefenokee Swamp or the Everglades.

Before he became the father of our nation, about 1763, Washington dug the "feeder ditch," or canal, along which I paddled. Otherwise, I couldn't have made the 10 miles in and out. Or more accurately, Washington's slaves dug the ditch. That must have been miserable work. George Washington and others acquired 40,000 acres of the swamp land through a "royal grant."

Washington did not have conservation in mind, but exploitation, taking out 70,000 cypress shingles in 1765. He did remark that it was a "glorious paradise abounding in wild fowl and game." The ditches were used to float out logs.

Not far before the lake, we reached a spillway, a small check dam used to keep the lake level higher. Unlike other basin swamps, the Dismal Swamp is gently sloping, with a northwest to southeast flow, dropping only 10 feet across an 8-mile expanse. We pulled the kayaks out and up a slide rack, and put them in again maybe 5 feet higher than the lower ditch.

We paddled another mile along the shore, searching out the biggest bald cypress trees. The oldest were 50 yards out into the lake with basal arches large enough to get our kayaks into, if we lie back low.

The water was a little more than waist-deep, with cold and warmer spots, and a good sandy bottom. The water is colored like tea, soaking out the tannin in the bark of submerged trees.

Lake Drummond is more than 3,000 acres in a nearly perfect circle. The origin of the lake is unknown. Based on bottom sediments and radiocarbon dating, geologists conclude the lake is much younger than the swamp — no more than 4,000 years old, in a swamp that is 10,000 years old. Maybe it was great peat fires, geological upset or a meteor crash that created it.

Making our way back, we wove in and out of the bald cypress at the edge between lake and forest. We never found Atlantic white cedar, another cypress. Once the largest known stands were here, but it is now rare, being logged out.

The Dismal Swamp southern bog lemming, once thought to be extinct, still lives here. The Dismal Swamp southeastern shrew, formerly a federally threatened species, has now been delisted.

The swamp is often scenic, aesthetically pleasing. Spanish moss grows here at its farthest northern reaches. Tall bald cypress, maples, gum, pond pine, loblolly pine, ferns and wildflowers are common and colorful.

Yes, swamps can be beautiful. To many, a beautiful bog or a pleasant mire is almost a contradiction in terms. Mountains are sublime; swamps are slimy.

Poet Edgar Allan Poe once went into this swamp to commit suicide, at least according to local folklore. He was thinking one should commit suicide in a dismal place. But he found the swamp so beautiful, he changed his mind.

Today, biologists agree that wetlands support rich biodiversity and are the most threatened of landscapes. Here, life persists — phoenix-like — forever regenerated in the midst of its perishing.

We could see that on all sides of our kayaks.

Our kayaks kept getting stuck on submerged logs, and we had to push off and dodge the cypress knees and the



The Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge stretches for more than 112,000 acres in North Carolina and Virginia. PHOTOS COURTESY OF HOLMES ROLSTON III

bushes, sometimes covered with poison oak. That made me even more grateful to Washington's slaves for the ditch.

By now, we were running out of time. We didn't want to have to paddle out in the dark. Steadily paddling back, we got out at twilight, with sore arms but proud of ourselves for venturing 12 miles in the swamp.

Washington sold, or tried to sell, his share of the swamp to "Light Horse" Harry Lee, father of Gen. Robert E. Lee. But Lee couldn't make the payments, so Washington got his share back. Later, a Dismal Swamp Land Company owned the swamp.

About the turn of the 20th century, much of the swamp became the property of the Union Camp Corporation. In 1973, Union Camp donated 49,100 acres to become the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge that now consumes more than 112,000 acres.

The new colonists discovered the lake when William Drummond lost his way while hunting in a "Slough of Despond," and found it. Drummond was later the first governor of what is now North Carolina. He was hanged in 1677 for taking part in Bacon's Rebellion, the first armed rebellion of the colonists against their British-appointed rulers.

The early settlers feared the dark swamp. By their reports, there were rattlesnakes as big around as a man's leg, coiled up hundreds at a time. There were cottonmouth water moccasins hanging in bushes above to drop into your boat. Though both of these snakes are there, their size and abundance are gross exaggerations.

We saw only a red-bellied water snake, who poised nicely for us. There also remain in the swamp some 300 bears.

Settlers feared the Dismal Swamp was full of poisonous air, rising from the rotting logs. Malaria, which means "bad air," was caught by those who lived near wetlands. That the disease was carried by a protist in mosquitoes breeding in stagnant or slow-moving waters was unknown until the 1890s.

William Byrd, surveying the Virginia-North Carolina state line in 1728 wrote: "Doubtless, the Eternal Shade that broods over this mighty Bog, and hinders the sun-beams from blessing the Ground, makes it an uncomfortable Habitation for any thing that has life. Foul Damps ascend without ceasing, corrupt the Air, and render it unfit for Respiration. Not even a Turkey-buzzard will venture to fly over it."

He was wrong. We saw a half-dozen buzzards in the air, a couple of them close enough that we wondered whether they thought we might be their next meal.

Early sailors wanted the swamp water on their ships.

They claimed it didn't spoil when they kept it many months at sea. Water doesn't spoil, but the tannin in the water, making it acidic, kept down bacteria that could cause disease.

A rare species in the

swamp is called the chicken turtle, named for its long, striped neck. The neck when stuck out is nearly as long as its shell. This turtle is on Virginia's endangered species list, though it is stable in other states.

Another day, we visited where the Dismal Swamp reaches the sea, now in First Landing State Park. Here, at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, the first settlers arrived. Still on the ship the "Susan Constant," the captain, on April 26, 1607, read aloud to the passengers assembled on the deck the laws and conditions of the new colony.

Just inland, forested high sand dunes are interspersed in the swamp. We walked over several of these on good terra firma. The newly arrived settlers did not yet know they

had reached a great swampland, then perhaps a million acres, and quite unsuitable for their landing.

Several weeks later, they decided to settle at Jamestown, reaching their new colony May 13.

So maybe you can say America really began where the Dismal Swamp meets the sea.

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Holmes Rolston III, front, discovered the best way to explore Lake Drummond in the middle of the Great Dismal Swamp is by kayak.