

15. Swamps: Cypress Domes

What is a swamp? A swamp is a forested wetland, including Cypress Domes, sloughs, floodplains, bay heads, etc.

Swamps are found throughout the state and once covered more than half of Florida. These forested wetlands may be independent or connected to other wetland ecosystems. Swamps may be seasonally wet or perpetually wet.

There are four major factors that determine the type of swamp that may appear in an area: 1, Hydro-period – the amount of time the soil stays wet. 2, Fire frequency – how often a fire burns through the area. 3, Organic matter accumulation – what and how much organic matter decays or doesn't decay in the swamp. 4, Source of water – spring fed, overflowed from adjacent wetland, or rain fed.

One common swamp found in central Florida prairies and flatwoods are Cypress Domes. Cypress Domes sit on poorly drained, depressed soils and are seasonally flooded. Whereas a Cypress Dome center (or pool) is wet for most of the year the surrounding majority of the swamp is fed by rainfall, mainly summer rains. The centers of many domes are empty of trees since they are continually flooded and seeds for new trees can not germinate in water.

Pond cypress trees dominate Cypress Domes. Along with pond cypress, a dome can contain fetterbush, wax myrtle, loblolly bays, gallberry, and other shrubs. Air plants are common within a dome, including Spanish moss, bromeliads, orchids, lichens, and others. Many vines grow within a dome, including grape, smilax, and poison ivy.

Animal life includes crows, warblers, hawks, swallowtail kites, raccoons, deer, turkeys, along with many species of frogs and snakes. Cypress Domes are a great refuge for wildlife to seek shade and water in, as well as nesting sites for many wetland and non-wetland birds.

Fires are infrequent within a dome, occurring about once every 30 to 70 years.

The arched shape of the Cypress Dome reflects the saucer-shaped depression the trees are growing in. That characteristic shape comes from the way cypress trees grow. Cypress trees are very water dependent: the more water, the faster they grow. Since the center of the depression is the wettest for the longest times, the center trees grow faster for longer times than the outlying trees. The trees around the outer edge of the dome are normally just as old as the ones inside it, but because they do not have as much water, their growth is stunted. Their twisted, gnarled shapes have made dramatic photographs.