

# Georgia & Little St. Simon's Island | Trip Report Sept. 30 – Oct. 6, 2022 | by Andrew Haffenden



**With guide, Andrew Haffenden, and participants: Andrea, Cynthia, David, Dottie, Gayle, Marcia, and Tom.**



Our 2022 fall tour to Georgia's Atlantic Coast began as an exercise in meteorological forecasting combined with steady nerves and luck. Fortunately we were successful with all three! Some 10 days before our start date a tropical storm in the Atlantic started tracking towards the Caribbean, with forecasts for it to develop into a hurricane. As the following week progressed, the forecast proved astute and Hurricane Ian developed and strengthened south of Cuba. Tracks varied in their predictions, from northwest into the central Gulf, to north along the western Florida coast and then northeast either through Georgia or crossing back into the Atlantic. Either meant issues. For me, living on Dauphin Island, my home could potentially be hit, and for our tour, who knows what might happen should the storm track take a turn towards us? We kept our eyes on the latest forecasts, checking multiple times per day, and noting as the hurricane took a turn north and rapidly gained strength. Computer models now predicted that it would become a Category 4 or 5 hurricane, crossing Florida north of Tampa and then heading toward Savannah, Georgia, the starting point for our tour. Given the size of the storm, it would impact all the locations on our itinerary!

Fortunately, a well-tested private forecasting service predicted Ian would make landfall further south and then cross back into the Atlantic and continue moving north and offshore. While still an issue, this could mean much



less impact on our destination. Fingers crossed. Just one day before landfall, we decided to proceed with the tour. We also delayed the start by a day so that guests would not be forced to travel in such bad weather.

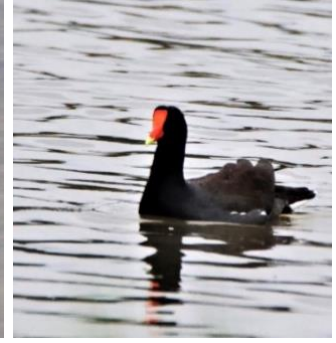
Unfortunately, two of our guests could not join us because their home in Englewood (near Tampa) suffered damage. On top of that, Andrea's flight was canceled, forcing her to scramble a hastily arranged flight so she could join Marcia and Cynthia who were driving from Atlanta. So those three joined David and Dottie and me in Savannah Saturday morning and we were away by noon, only a few hours later than originally planned! Apparently the staff on Little St Simons Island had evacuated, but we were told that they would return the day before our arrival, and the lodge expected to be open. So began our tour to Georgia's Atlantic Coast Islands with David and Dottie from Idaho and Massachusetts, Andrea from California, Marcia from Atlanta and Cynthia from Albuquerque – quite a range of home states!

## **Fri., Sept. 30**                      **Savannah**

Though today was arrival and welcome dinner day, only David and Dottie were in Savannah. I had already checked the proposed afternoon outing to Canal Museum Nature Center the day before, but it was shut due to the hurricane. The forecast called for rain and strong winds, but that wasn't the case so we decided to try the Nature Center to see if it had re-opened, but sadly it was closed. But a nearby park served as an alternative, so we went there and picked up our first birds other than the Northern Mockingbird and Boat-tailed Grackles we'd seen at the hotel. It was very quiet, not surprising since many coastal birds had likely moved inland to avoid the hurricane. But a few were seen including Pine Warbler, both vultures, Osprey, Eastern Bluebirds, Carolina Chickadees and a Red-tailed Hawk. David, a photographer, took some very nice pictures of the Palm Warblers hunting for insects in the long grass, and the Bluebirds posed for him, so the park was counted a success! A friendly local suggested we visit Blue Sky Preserve just a couple of miles back along the road. While also quiet this is a nice location, with trails through open wet pine forest. We picked up Red-bellied Woodpecker, White-eyed Vireo and Black-throated Blue Warbler, plus the expected cardinals and jays. We returned to the hotel after stopping to purchase snacks and drinks to carry with us through the tour. After a break, we walked to the Seafood Grill for dinner. Our welcome drinks morphed into a lesson in martini making that David volunteered for the relatively new bartender, who was happy to hone her skills. Dinner was excellent, and we retired for the night looking forward to meeting the rest of our party and officially starting the tour!

## **Sat., Oct. 1**                      **Harris Neck NWR | St Simons Island**

Saturday morning dawned a beautiful blue sky with a cool breeze. While we were glad to see this, our minds turned towards our missing travelers in Florida. As we loaded our bags into the van, a Brown Anole appeared and



I decided a closer look was in order. The anole did not appreciate my initiative and showed its displeasure by biting my finger and refusing to let go. Eventually it relented and we continued with our task. Around 11 a.m., our trio from Atlanta arrived. We loaded their gear and departed, making a brief stop to pick up picnic lunches and purchase binoculars for Marcia who managed to leave hers behind in Atlanta! We headed south to Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. I had been assured by a volunteer that the refuge would be open and little affected by the storm, and fortunately they were correct, and as an added bonus, we had the refuge nearly to ourselves. We ate our picnic lunch at a lookout over Woody Pond as a steady stream of birds flew above us. Harris Neck is a mostly wetland area comprising man-made freshwater ponds, salt marsh, open fields, forested wetlands, and mixed hardwood/pine forest. Geographically, a “neck” is a long, thin peninsula, but Georgia seems to use the word for any land surrounded on three sides by water. On the far side of Woody Pond is a major Wood Stork breeding colony and roost, though this late in the season most birds were there only in the evening. However, there was no shortage of birds flying over, and some landed both there and close to our picnic area. We had plenty to occupy, or rather interrupt, us during the lunch break and afterwards with Anhinga flying over and roosting in a tree, Double-crested Cormorants, several Great Blue Herons, a Little Blue Heron and three Roseate Spoonbills. A Red-tailed Hawk flew back and forth as did Turkey Vultures, and Blue Jays and many Northern Cardinals could be seen and heard. An unexpected Alder Flycatcher called loudly several times, giving its distinctive descending two-note call, but it never showed itself. Though not on the official Harris Neck bird list, Alder Flycatcher has been recorded at this time of the year just to the south, and more commonly a little further north in similar island habitat in coastal South Carolina. Several logs poking out of the water provided sunning platforms for Pond Sliders. As we prepared to leave, we discovered that this eagle-eyed group of bird observers had failed to notice a seven-foot female alligator with six or seven hatchlings in the pond vegetation just a few yards from where we ate lunch!

After Woody Pond we continued along the one-way loop road to our next stop at Teal Pond. This provided closeup views of several species, and the photographers started clicking away, getting some excellent, if slightly backlit, shots. Most notable were 34 Roseate Spoonbills preening and bathing. With them were White Ibis, Little Blue Herons and Glossy Ibis, and further back a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron stood, as usual, stock still. A Common Gallinule, Sora and two Pied-billed Grebes rounded out this stop. At the river overlook Brown Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants and Royal Terns flew over.

We continued our drive stopping at Thomas Loop where we found several expected birds such as Red-winged Blackbird, American Crow (identified by voice and shape) and an assortment of grackles, jays and cardinals. At the landing itself, a view over the marsh provided nice looks at Brown Pelican, Osprey and a Bald Eagle, and heard Clapper Rail as well. We finished up the loop and then headed further south to St Simons Inn, our home for the next two nights. We checked in and then went for a walk along the waterfront and out onto the pier. Not much bird activity – there is no beach or mudflat – but there were a lot of Boat-tailed Grackles in the park, which offered the chance to discuss the differences between this species and the smaller Common Grackle. Some male Common



Grackles can grow very long and twisted tails, making identification difficult. The brown (rather than black) long-legged females are a good clue as both species have light colored eyes on the Atlantic coast. Some non-birding time was spent watching a huge car transport ship sail past, seemingly just yards away as it made its way up the channel.

Our second welcome dinner – now with all participants – took place at the Georgia Sea Grill a short walk from our hotel. The food arrived before we could complete our checklist. All choices were delicious, including the various shared deserts we tried. We finished the checklist back at the hotel then retired, looking forward to tomorrow’s beach birding.

## **Sun., Oct. 2: Gould’s Inlet, Jekyll Island, Hampton River**

After breakfast at the hotel – an expansive continental buoyed by freshly ground coffee for each cup, and the best on our tour – we headed for Gould’s Inlet, about a mile away. Our schedule was a bit tight today as our boat trip, which is usually at Jekyll Island, had to be moved due to a logistics issue. Low tide at the inlet meant the birds were a bit further out, so we made use of the scope and placed more emphasis on shape and size vs. plumage characteristics for ID. However, this is always a useful ID method, so practicing this skill was beneficial for all. As is usual for most beaches in southern U.S., the hyper-active and undeniably cute Sanderling was the most common shorebird. Similarly, Laughing Gull was the most common gull. Single Ring-billed and a Herring Gulls added to the gull diversity, and a Caspian Tern along with 300+ Royal Terns, with their mewling youngsters in tow, were present along with a sizeable squadron of some 200 Black Skimmers, always a favorite, adding to the Larid count. Least Sandpipers and Willets were also present. Returning to view the mudflat across a small channel no birds were seen, immediately pushing the “where’s the Peregrine” button, and sure enough, scanning around we located probably a female Peregrine flashing by. With our mudflats emptied and a rising tide threatening access, we headed back, stopping at a pond to enjoy a Snowy Egret taking advantage of a cast-net fisherman to get an easy meal. We then headed for Jekyll Island, about 30 minutes further south.

Jekyll Island is private, accessed by a causeway and bridge, and was once home to some of the wealthiest tycoons in America who built palatial houses on what came to be known as “Millionaire’s Row.” Crossing to the island, we noted many of the usual herons, ibises and egrets, with Great Egret and Tricolored Heron new for our list. We headed straight to our target area, an old amphitheater with an adjacent pond surrounded by oak forest festooned with Spanish Moss. Right away we heard the gentle tapping of a Downy Woodpecker along with the raucous call of Red-bellied Woodpecker. Several White-eyed Vireos were heard, but frustratingly none showed



themselves. Young White-eyes are often still working on their vocalizations and thus exhibit very “untutored” calls that they will perfect by the time Spring rolls around. A nice Yellow-throated Vireo was seen along with many of the expected eastern birds. Once we reached the ponds, bird activity increased and we were excited to find Black-throated Blue Warblers. As is their habit in fall and winter, they feed low to the ground. American Redstarts were about as well. We had good looks at “Yellowstarts,” as the females and first-year males are sometimes called, as well as males. A couple of Black-and-white Warblers foraged on the trunks and large branches, quite a beautiful bird when seen well, despite its lack of color. The tree-shrouded pond gave us some wonderful, close views of 15 or so Roseate Spoonbills loafing on a fallen tree to the delight of the photographers in the group. Many, memory cards were filled recording these birds! We also saw Yellow-crowned Night-Herons roosting in the trees, and a Belted Kingfisher flew by, with its rattling call.

We could have easily spent more time here, however, we had a boat to catch! I saw an Ovenbird just off the trail on our way back to the van, but it chose not to cooperate with the group despite intensive searching. On the drive back we had extensive and quite spectacular views of the marshland and East River from the high Sydney Lanier Bridge. Time being short, Subway was the lunch of choice, eaten (by most) as we drove the length of St Simons Island to the Hampton River Marina where our pontoon boat was docked. We met Captain Brooks, a laid-back gentleman who grew up in the area. A keen fisherman who also offers fishing charters, Captain Brooks worked for over 10 years as a professional biologist on the Georgia coast, and his knowledge of the birds, fish, plants and ecology were on full display during our three-hour tour of the Hampton River and through the backwaters of the marshes. Four species of terns flew past – Caspian, Royal, Forster’s and a single Common, and Clapper Rails called frequently. Herons and egrets hunted or loafed in the marsh, and on our return skeins of White and a few Glossy Ibis ranged across the sky. Captain Brooks entertained us with stories of growing up on the Georgia coast. It was such a pleasure listening to his heartfelt appreciation for being born in the area and being able to spend his life on the water.

After the tour we returned to our hotel for a little down time after a busy day, then did our checklist and enjoyed dinner at the historic Bennie’s Red Barn Restaurant, an institution on St Simons for nearly 70 years.

## **Mon., Oct. 3                      Little St Simons Island**

After a lazy start to the day, we headed back to the marina for our 10:30 ferry to Little St Simons Island Lodge. As is often the case after a hurricane, the weather was warm and sunny. Our route took us past some of the same areas we explored the day before until we reached the island’s dock. Originally a hunting lodge built in 1917, Little



St Simons Island Lodge is the only development on the island and has a maximum of just 32 guests to explore its 11,000 acres and seven miles of beaches. The entire property is protected under a conservation easement administered by The Nature Conservancy. In addition to wonderful hospitality, there is also a Conservation Center that serves as a base for biologists, graduate students and coastal managers to research wildlife and conservation issues pertinent to the Georgia coast. After checking in, one of the resident guides took us on a short drive for some birding along the track to the beach before lunch. We stopped to admire a large group of Black Vultures roosting in a tree. These often-overlooked birds are none-the-less fascinating, and we observed several birds in flight, noting the key differences separating them from Turkey Vultures including flight style, wing and tail shape and pattern. A Red-bellied Woodpecker gave us excellent views, and we joked about the name that describes a rarely seen feature versus the obvious red head. However, those who have traveled in the Caribbean and points south can appreciate just how many other woodpeckers in the same genus have similar head coloring. Our guide introduced us to the island's botany as we made our way back to the lodge for lunch, low country style, sourced from local growers and its own gardens, and the chefs add some creative touches to the traditional dishes, delicious! We decided to explore the area around Myrtle Pond with its many blinds and towers. These large ponds were originally rice fields, and the old irrigation gates can still be seen. We had excellent views of Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets, Roseate Spoonbills and, of course, White Ibis, probably the most common bird in the area. After a thrilling encounter with a Nine-banded Armadillo snuffling along the road, we visited a blind where several young alligators were taking advantage of the warm water from an exposed drainpipe directly in front of us. Another treat were White Ibis and Roseate Spoonbills right next to the blind. On the water were more waders dotted around, and in the distance we could see a distant flotilla of ducks, which we decided were Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall and Mottled Duck, which we confirmed once we got to the next blind. Both Black and Turkey Vultures, an Osprey, a pair of Common Gallinules, and a nice adult Bald Eagle fly over, as well as a Red-tailed Hawk. Along the dirt road we had good looks at Palm Warblers and all three mimids: Northern Mockingbird, Brown Thrasher and Gray Catbird.

Barn Swallows were hunting over the water, and a few Tree Swallows were seen over the fields. An Anhinga flew over and another was seen perched. A squadron of Wood Storks were returning to their evening roost. Black-crowned Night-Herons were found on their day roost, and a Belted Kingfisher gave us a show flying back and forth to a post in the water. Back at the lodge some evening birding on the grounds turned up American Redstarts, Pine Warblers, and Sora and Clapper Rails were heard in the marsh. We then gathered in the house for our checklist session. Helen House was built in 1928 and features tabby walls, an old construction material that dates to the 1600s, made of oyster shell lime, sand, water, ash and shells. It is very durable, as evidenced by the nearly 100-year-old house. Of course our growing list was irrigated with some nice wine, a tradition started at our previous accommodations and continued through the tour. We then went over to the main lodge for pre-dinner nibbles



and more wine until the bell rang for dinner. After an excellent meal an early night was in store to make the most of the next day.

## **Tues., Oct. 4                      Little St Simons Island**

Breakfast wasn't served until 7:30 but early risers like me and others in the group were greeted at 6 a.m. with freshly baked pastries to go with our first coffee. This gave a chance for some birding around the lodge. Then, after a full breakfast, we decided to explore the beach. Mistake! While the lodge was sheltered from the NNE winds, not so the beach. We walked the 200-yard path through the dunes to the beach, where we encountered winds gusting to some 20 to 25 mph! Blowing sand drove the few birds present to hunker down. Undeterred, at least at this stage, we headed along the beach towards them. We managed to see a few birds including two Piping Plovers, which was nice. Neither were banded so no story to be uncovered about them. A Black-bellied Plover, a Ruddy Turnstone, six Sanderlings and a tiny Least Sandpiper did their best to forage in the wind, and from what we could see, they were having successful. We were also fortunate to see a Northern Harrier cruising the dunes, and a Peregrine Falcon patrolled the beach, but the shorebird pickings were slim. Other than a few Red-winged Blackbirds in the dunes we didn't see much else on the beach, nor in the water. When our scope blew over, we took it as a sign that it was time to make a strategic retreat. Norm's Pond was sheltered from the wind and a blind offered good views of Common Gallinule, Belted Kingfisher and a handsome Northern Waterthrush, which spent 10 minutes foraging in a muddy area. A Brown Thrasher occupied itself in the bushes along with a Common Yellowthroat and a less expected Yellow Warbler. Open upright pipes apparently are good shelter for Squirrel Tree Frogs, as a couple were occupied by these small and variable frogs, which are very similar to the American Green Tree Frog, just lacking the strong and often dark-edged white line along the sides. Eventually we loaded back onto the truck and returned to the lodge for lunch, along the way seeing the usual waders plus soaring Wood Storks.

Keeping the wind in mind, we opted for a protected area for our afternoon outing, hiking along the Old House Trail Loop. Coastal Live Oaks tend to grow best in soils rich in calcium, and the broken seashells provide this. Unfortunately, birds were few and far between, but the easy hike was a nice way to spend the afternoon, and we learned about many of the plants around us including the common Yaupon Holly. Despite its scientific name, *Ilex vomitoria*, the leaves are used to make a therapeutic tea – just don't eat the berries! Eventually another viniferous checklist was worked through, after which we listened to one of the researchers from the Conservation Center describe of some of the conservation and wildlife protection work being done there.



## **Wed., Oct. 5                      Little St Simons Island**

Calm winds this morning gave us confidence to try the beach again. David and Dottie elected to remain at the lodge in hopes of seeing one or both of the female Painted Buntings I had seen earlier. The beach was much more pleasant and we could enjoy the shorebirds that were present. A small flock of Royal and Caspian Terns were present and one Forster's Tern, which enabled some discussion about identifying terns. A nice surprise among the Herring and Laughing Gulls was a medium sized, dark-backed gull, which on closer inspection turned out to be a Lesser Black-backed Gull. This bird, once rare in the south, has been increasing in numbers rapidly and is now frequently seen all the way down into Florida where a reasonably high number overwinter. But birds weren't the only animals to be seen, as conditions were right for Lemon Sharks, which we observed hunt in the shallows. Several were quite large for this species and at times nearly a third off their bodies were above water. Our guide, who has worked with Lemon Sharks commented she had rarely seen any this big, while pointing out the large second dorsal fin near the tail, a useful way to ID this shark species. We continued birding, shelling and fossiling until lunchtime. Back at the lodge we found that David and Dottie had indeed seen the male Painted Bunting at a feeder near one of the cabins, but despite our efforts it did not make an appearance for the rest of us.

That afternoon was spent at the far end of the island on North River Beach, followed with a second visit to Myrtle Pond. We did happen upon another armadillo in almost exactly the same spot as before, but this one did not have a damaged tail. As gopher tortoises have declined across the southeast, armadillos have stepped in to claim this niche. In fact, a study has shown that there are far more native animals, insects, crabs, snakes, birds and rodents, that make use of the abandoned tortoise burrows more than the armadillos themselves; some three quarters of burrows in the study were used by animals other than armadillos!

Passing a few Glossy Ibis that were in among the White Ibis, we continued our walk to where the road ended at the Altamaha River, which separates Little St Simons from the Altamaha Wildlife Management Area and adjacent Wolf Island National Wildlife Refuge at the mouth of the river. A stately Great Egret stood guard in a pond as spotted Sandpipers foraged around the edges. It was here we noticed an Aldo Leopold-esque bench on the beach. Apart from our truck, this was the only man-made object in sight, and we had to believe it has been here since before Columbus set foot in the Bahamas. How entirely appropriate!

We returned to Myrtle Pond, this time exploring the other side and stopped at a blind that was obviously very popular with racoons judging from the amount of droppings. However, our very able guides quickly swept the platform clean, a very thoughtful touch. Out over the water a Belted Kingfisher hovered and 10 or so Mottled





Ducks flew in, quite a large number and, as well as we could determine, these were pure Mottleds. Like Black Ducks further north, this range-restricted species is readily interbreeding with Mallards resulting in a large and growing population of hybrids. Two Greater Yellowlegs were wading in the distance, a few Wood Storks flew over, and then the afternoon skeins of White Ibis began making their way across the sky. In the surrounding woods both Eastern Phoebe and Downy Woodpecker were seen and heard, and a Bald Eagle flew over.

Returning to the lodge we gathered for the checklist, happy hour, and dinner. This was our last night on Little St Simons, and even with bird numbers down due to hurricane Ian, we all agreed that we would remember these days as a highlight of our tour.

## **Thu., Oct. 6                      Little St Simons Island | Savannah**

A sleep-in morning today, as we thought we had pretty much exhausted our long list of target birds. At 10 a.m. we boarded our pontoon ferry to St Simons Island ahead of our drive to Savannah. A last check of the feeders did not turn up the male Painted Bunting, and then we were on our way. We were joined by a few other guests along with two staff members who were celebrating their first anniversary, which showed in their smiles at each other and cuddling. Having feasted like royalty, we elected to forego lunch and nibble on car snacks, which made for a quick drive to our hotel in Savannah. We arrived outside the hotel just in time for our scheduled tour of the central historic zone. We learned about many historic buildings, including the one where Sherman, in discussion with freed slaves, developed the concept of “40 acres and a mule,” even though the mule wasn’t officially part of his Field Order. Our guide’s local perspective on Savannah’s history including Native American history made this a very interesting and enjoyable tour, something everyone visiting Savannah should do. After the tour we had some time before our much-anticipated dinner at The Pink House, considered by many to be the best restaurant in Savannah, perhaps in all Georgia. Thanks to Naturalist Journeys’ office staff, we skipped the long line and were seated within minutes of arrival. Our anticipation was justified; the setting, food and service were all top notch. By the end of our nearly two-hour dining experience, we were well satisfied, very happy that The Old Pink House was chosen for our farewell dinner, and ready to walk back to the hotel and retire. Which we did.

**Fri., Oct. 7**

## **Back to Savannah | Departures**

Departure day is always a little sad, with farewells to new-found friends and no birding to look forward to, just a long drive or planes and airports to deal with. And so it was today, as we climbed into our van for a last time and headed to our first hotel of the tour, where Marcia's car was stored, to drop off her, Cynthia and Andrea for their drive back to Atlanta, then David, Dottie and I returned for our morning flights. As Tour Leader I would like to thank David, Dottie, Marcia, Cynthia, and Andrea for being so understanding of the issues and uncertainty caused by the hurricane, and for being willing to hold on until the very last minute to see if we could run the tour, and then participating so enthusiastically despite the lowered bird numbers. True troopers. Thank you all.

*Group at Little St Simons, Osprey (Drew Haffenden – DH) Anole (David Chan - DC), Royal Tern (DH), Alligator (DC), dinner server, Common Gallinule (DC), Cast netter (DC), Peregrine (DH), Black-crowned Night-heron (DH), Spoonbill (DC), Great Blue Heron (DH), Snowy Egret (DH), Anhinga (DC), American Redstart (DC), 9-banded Armadillo (DC), Piping Plover (DH), Squirrel Tree Frogs (DC), Wood Stork (DC), Gulf Fritillary (DC), Beautyberry (DH), Golden Silk Orbweaver (DH), Male Painted Bunting (DC), Black-throated Blue Warbler (DH), female Painted Bunting (DC), Little St Simon's Island track (DH), Red-winged Blackbird (DH), Sherman House (DH), group is Savanna square (DH)*