

# Georgia & Little St. Simon Island | Sept. 29 – Oct. 6, 2023 | Trip Report | by Andrew Haffenden



With guide Andrew Haffenden and participants Ann, Anne, Betty, Bob, Niki and Pete



The group joined Naturalist Journeys guide Drew Haffenden to explore the Georgia coast from Savannah to Jekyll Island, including a three-night stay on pristine Little St. Simon's Island. The weather was beautiful throughout, with low eighties temperatures, a cooling breeze (although a tad windy on a couple of days) and low humidity. Among the many highlights were a friendly Diamondback Rattlesnake who wanted to share our nice dry boat, three manatees seen at leisure close up and a memorable meal at the Pink House in Savannah.

## **Fri., Sept. 29**                      **Welcome to Savannah!**

Ann and Don flew in a day early, and the rest of us arrived today by air or car. Niki arrived midafternoon. We decided to postpone Savannah national Wildlife Refuge until tomorrow to give us more time and allow Niki to experience it as well. Instead, we visited the Ogeechee Canal Museum and Nature Center to bird in the oak



woodlands, only to be thwarted for a second year in a row. Last year Hurricane Ian had caused the Center to close down, this time when we arrived the Center was about to close the trails due to flooding! However, the very friendly manager directed us to another section of the preserve about two miles away, an area of Live Oak, Tupelo and Cypress swamp with a boardwalk. We headed there for a very nice walk along the side of the marsh which now covers the original canal, with American Redstarts bouncing about with their distinctive fluttering flight and tail fanning. Looking out through the cypress knees and hanging Spanish Moss was the epitome of being in the South. A handsome Black Racer on the track stayed till for photos – highly unusual and due in part to its desire to sun itself to warm the old skin for easy molting. Several White-eyed Vireos were heard, with their much messier Fall calls than the precision heard in Spring. Fish crows flying over allowed us to distinguish their call from the American Crow, and two season-first Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers brought our woodpecker species to three. We then returned to our very comfortable hotel, welcoming Niki to the group. At the back of the hotel was a lake surrounded by trees, and we birded this convenient location for a bit, getting several wading birds, Pied Grebes, Anhingas, a Common Gallinule and a couple of Common Yellowthroats. A little later when ran our first checklist, then walked next door for our welcome dinner.

### **Sat., Sept. 30 Savannah NWR | Harris Neck NWR | St. Simons Island**

A very substantial and tasty breakfast was enjoyed at our hotel then we packed our vehicle and headed for the Savannah national Wildlife refuge, just 20 minutes away. We had expected to spend about two hours here, but the time ran away, and we basically forced ourselves to leave some three hours into the day. A whole slew of wading birds was seen along the Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive, including Great and Snowy Egrets and Great Blue, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, the latter a lifer for several. All white hatch year Little Blues and nearby Snowy Egrets gave us good comparisons to separate these similar birds, with Great Egrets offering a size comparison. Blue-winged Teal flew over, and many Black-bellied Whistling Ducks were grouped about, included juveniles ranging from still striped and downy young to well fledged older birds, still with black bills. With such a long period of breeding it's no surprise they are rapidly increasing in the Southeast and spreading further north and west. In addition to hearing Common Gallinules two Purple Gallinules were also feeding in the marsh. An early Broad-winged Hawk flew over, and Turkey Vultures circled in the sky. There were plenty of Boat-tailed Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds to distract us in the reeds, though some colorful Common Yellowthroats and zippy Marsh Wrens were also there.

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As were several alligators! A highlight was watching some ripples in a canal turn into a gray hump – a Manatee feeding on grasses in preparation for its fast approaching migration south. A very lucky sighting so we spent time watching it snuffling in the grass and coming up for air. A Loggerhead Shrike allowed excellent views. Some of the small clusters of Live Oaks and magnolias gave us often frustrating glimpses but also decent looks at a variety of migrating warblers, including Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart, and Yellow, Hooded Warbler, Black-throated Blue and Prairie Warblers, the latter especially cooperatively feeding in the open showing its distinctive and definitive facial pattern. For some of our group a number of lifers had already been chalked up as we tore ourselves to make our way south. After a short stop to pick up some drinks and snacks, and picnic sandwiches at Panera Bread we left Savannah for Harris Neck NWR about 45 minutes away. On our late arrival we had a picnic lunch at the entry and did a quick bit of birding tempted by our ears and helped by a local couple. Mostly it was in vain as the warblers and White-eyed Vireos persisted in being high in the leaves, and mostly backlit. Warblering! I don't call them flitter birds for nothing. We then drove a few minutes to Woody Hole, a highlight of the refuge. We weren't disappointed. As we waited Wood Storks appeared, both perching and circling lazily overhead. Newcomers to our list over the hour or so included Black-crowned Night-heron, Roseate Spoonbill, Black vulture – we took the opportunity to compare the different outlines, wing shape, tail shape and flight style so be able to distinguish these at a glance – Osprey, Gray Catbird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher heard only and Belted Kingfisher. Moving to our next stop we were disappointed to find the pond dry and weedy. So we finished the circuit, then continued south to Little St Simon's Island to check in to our hotel for the next two nights.

A very well supplied local liquor store had the preferred wines of a couple of our group, and our checklist was done outside under the trees with a glass of wine. We then walked a few minutes to the Georgia Sea Grill for a dinner of expertly prepared and cooked seafood of various kinds. Well satisfied with our day we headed back to the Inn and our beds, looking forward to our next day.

## **Sun., Oct. 1                      St. Simons Island | Jekyll Island | Boat Tour**

A simple but sufficient continental breakfast, and the best coffee of the tour, at the Inn started our day (there was going to be plenty of food during the tour and no-one was going to go hungry) then we headed a little bit further south to Jekyll Island. Once a private island and the playground of millionaires, it is now a Georgia State Park with both historical sightseeing and nature enjoyment, with much of the island maintained undeveloped. We first headed for the old Amphitheater, no longer in use but due to the surrounding pine-oak forest and a lagoon an excellent birding area. Once again, we were not disappointed, though the number of songbirds was



lower than usual, with White-eyed Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet (recent arrivals for winter), the usual American Redstarts including a very bright male, a couple of Black-throated Blue Warblers and a single Northern Cardinal as the ones noted. One Black-throated Blue gave us long and very good observations, including the square white wing patch, offered referred to as the handkerchief, which the much plainer female also has. The Kinglets gave us an opportunity to distinguish their wing shudder behavior, a great field mark for these often-fast-moving birds.

One White-eyed Vireo gave us a decent view, showing the dark eye of a hatch year bird, which often confuses some birders. Other poorly seen warblers included a Northern Parula and a probable female Chestnut-sided. Two raptors, a fast-flying Cooper's hawk and a more sedately flying Red-tailed Hawk, a migrant arriving in the

south for winter, were seen. But it was once again a couple of wading birds that stole the show, with at least twenty-one adult and juvenile Black-crowned Night-herons and forty-two Roseate Spoonbills occupying a very small area, allowing excellent views bare-eyed, and through binoculars and scope. Several adult night-herons were sunning with drooping wings giving them a strange appearance. After enjoying the morning, we headed to the marina for lunch, followed by our boat ride. Lunch was very enjoyable, sitting outdoors overlooking the water eating burgers, seafood tacos and oyster po'boys. A few Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns flew about, while others loafed on the dock with some winter-plumaged Forster's Terns, their black eye patches making the ID simple. A small – four feet or so – alligator also thought the dock was a great place to sun.

At our appointed time we boarded our pontoon boat for our ninety-minute cruise. The main attraction of the cruise is the Bottle-nosed Dolphins the make the sheltered Jekyll C reek and Sound area home, but the captain points out other wildlife such as birds and manatees. We also got some human history, natural history and geography. The dolphins did not disappoint, coming close to the boat often as they just loafed around or hunted for fish. At a (treated) wastewater outlet three Manatees were observed drinking the fresh water exiting the underwater pipe. As the water was strongly brackish a source of fresh water was necessary for them. At the end of the island spit loafing flocks of gulls and terns were mostly Laughing and Royals, fifteen or so Forster's with a couple of hundred Black Skimmers obvious with their black backs. The more distant flock had two adult and one juvenile Lesser Black-backed Gulls, a species rapidly increasing in the south from Fall to Spring. We returned to the dock after an excellent time on the water and returned to our hotel. After our checklist we walked to the Mullet Bay Restaurant, a very southern no-frills place but with perfectly cooked seafood.



## **Mon., Oct. 2                      Gould's Inlet | Gaule Preserve | Little St. Simon Island**

We took advantage of tide time to have a more relaxed wake up and breakfast time, packed up and drove the short distance to Gould's Inlet, known as one of the best shorebird places on the Georgia Coast. However, this was not to be the case this morning, as a very high tide combined with strong NNE winds to bring the water up to the dune line. Even locals came to stand amazed and take photos of the high water. No birding to be done here, so we decided to visit our second destination, Gaule Preserve, then return later in the day when the tide was lower. Gaule Preserve is 258 acres of mostly wilderness maritime and Pond Pine Forest, with marsh edges in the center of the island, owned by the St Simons Land Trust. Pond Pine is uncommon, only found on the older parts of the barrier islands, where development has been concentrated thus making this forest quite rare.

Though the birdlife was quiet our one-mile loop walk was through this forest, with Live Oaks, Pond Pines, Southern Magnolias, Cabbage Palms and Saw Palmettos dominating the vegetation mix. White-eyed Vireos called, as did a Yellow-billed Cuckoo which also allowed a brief view. Red-bellied Woodpeckers called and flew about, perhaps the most ubiquitous forest bird in the south.

We coaxed a calling Eastern Towhee to come closer and show himself, giving great views of this very attractive but often hard to see bird. A Brown Thrasher provided a lesson in habitat use as a field ID mark by calling high in a pine, something the similar sounding Northern Mockingbird would not do. After a pleasant hour and a half, it was time for lunch, where a very friendly and extremely efficient order-taker, waitress and busser worked the room by herself always smiling, laughing and talking to locals. The food was good too. After lunch we returned to Gould's Inlet, but although the tide was now nominally much lower only a few feet of sand was visible. A few Sanderlings dashed about, and a couple of Laughing Gulls flew disinterestedly about. We decided to give up on Gould's and head to the marina early to see what may be around there while we waited for our boat to Little St. Simon's. At the marina gulls, Royal and Forster's Terns loafed, and a few waders, including Little Blue and a Tricolored looked-for food. Both Black and Turkey Vultures floated overhead, allowing for ID reviews, and a couple of times small groups of Wood Storks came wheeling over. A researcher also waiting for the boat gave a quick summary of her work in the island's grasslands documenting plant variety and distribution to better understand microhabitat use by wildlife. Eventually our boat appeared, bags were packed aboard, and we headed east along the Hamilton River, soon turning north onto the obviously named Mosquito Creek, the waterway the lodge faced.

On arrival we walked up to the lodge for an introduction to the lodge and island, and a review of how we would be spending our time over the next 3 days. Some of us were welcomed by an armadillo snuffing away next to



the steps, a good sign for a wildlife lodge. We then had some time to settle into our very nice accommodations, do our checklist before the nightly wine and snacks in the main lodge ran into dinner at 6.30. We were split between a couple of rooms in the main lodge and Helen House, a fine separate building where we had a lounge and screen porch for our exclusive use, as well as a kitchen. This was the ideal place to for our checklist each evening or to just relax during the day between activities. Dinner each night was family style, supplemented by a special offering for our lactose intolerant group member. After dinner a short talk by one of the island naturalists on local owls was available, followed by an owl prowl. Despite hearing Eastern Screech Owls quite close, we couldn't get eyes on them.

## **Tues., Oct. 3                      Little St. Simon Island**

Each breakfast and lunch one of the naturalists would describe the morning or afternoon outings that were available. This morning we were lucky; the larger boat was not needed for transfers so a boat ride around the marshes was offered. We unanimously chose this, and at 10.15 set out from the dock. The day was perfect, blue skies and a light breeze. Our three naturalists on board – Clare, Tyler and boat captain Nate gave us information about the marsh, its plants and wildlife while searching for birds and water dwellers. Small birds occasionally flew across the creek, and occasionally nearly into the boat. These were mostly migrant Yellow Warblers and both migrant and resident Common Yellowthroats. Clapper Rails called often, and one flew across but was missed by most.

The crew were especially watching for Seaside Sparrows, and sure enough these small dark birds started appearing. While at first hard to see, with a bit of practice getting onto the bird became easier. Personally, I was surprised how dark this Atlantic race was; along the northern Gulf they are much lighter and two-toned. A variety of waders was seen, mostly foraging, including Little Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, lots of Snowy and Great Egrets, a couple of juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-herons that we could compare to the Jekyll Island Black-crowns, a flock of White ibis and a lone Roseate Spoonbill. A Northern Harrier flew low over the marsh and two Belted Kingfishers flew off uttering their rattle call. An adult Bald Eagle was seen in the distance, and kindly waited for the boat to get closer for excellent views and photos. Eventually it flew off to join another adult further away. A dolphin was seen several times, and some of us saw a shark snatch the remains of a Redfish from the surface. Not a place to go swimming!



However, for most of us, if not all, the highlight was non-avian. Due to the high tide and wind-pushed water some of the marsh areas usually out of the water were submerged, including one apparently home to an Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake. The snake decided to abandon its flooded home and strike out for drier land. Although not land exactly our boat was dry, and the snake decided “close enough” and headed for us. Nate spent the next fifteen minutes maneuvering the boat in the narrow channel to both enable good views but also to prevent the rattler from boarding or getting caught in the propellers or pontoons. The snake was determined, but sadly for it unsuccessful in its quest, and we eventually left it swimming to another part of the marsh. (Some of us secretly, and not so secretly, hoped it would succeed.) We eventually returned to the dock after a great morning on the water.

After a lunch of enchiladas, we chose the beach walk option for our afternoon outing. Though windy the tide was good, and the cloud would assist in keeping us cool. We drove the two miles to the beach sitting on comfortable benches in the bed of pickup trucks, the usual mode of travel other than foot or bicycle on Little St.

Simon's. No private vehicles are permitted on the island. Once at the beach we walked along a dune boardwalk to the beach itself. Some guests settled in for a beachy relax, but our group wanted to see what shorebirds we could find, and maybe other birds as well. We managed both aims. Shorebirds included lots of Sanderlings, running around on fast little legs as usual, more sedate Least Sandpipers, several winter plumage Ruddy Turnstones and a very nice flock of nine Red Knots that flew and landed near us, then foraged in their typical marching flock line for an extended period allowing great scope views of these endangered birds, most in full basic plumage. I consider these birds to be the epitome of average – midsized, average leg and bill length, most of the time seen in their average sandpiper grays and whites. We had both large Black-bellied Plovers, mostly in basic plumage or juveniles, and four much smaller Piping Plovers. Bands on one bird indicated it was from the endangered Great Lakes population, and likely a hatch year bird (or an older bird that has not been recaptured). Time to study one of the Piping Plovers feeding near a Sanderling and a Least Sandpiper showed the very different foraging techniques of plovers and sandpipers that enables birds at quite a distance to be easily allocated to one of the two groups, reducing possible ID choices quickly. One Caspian Tern could be quickly compared to the more common Royal Terns; these and two Merlin zooming along the dunes provided the non-shorebird contingent. Due to the high tides there were quite a few shells on the beach, including large and



unbroken Sand Dollars, unusual as their fragility makes it hard to find large complete ones. Anne was especially happy to collect a few. After our birdy time on the beach, and a second location further along having too much water to support shorebirds we returned to the lodge. On arrival a young armadillo was foraging on the lawn, largely ignoring us as it looked for grubs and other armadillo delicacies. After a break we compiled our growing checklist, enjoyed our aperitifs with other guests then had another excellent dinner.

### **Wed., Oct. 4 Little St. Simon Island**

This morning the outing of choice for the group was a vehicle-based exploration of the northern part of the island, especially the large Myrtle Pond, an impoundment that is managed for water depth depending on the season, either for the many breeding waders or for the ducks that spend the winter here – this latter was especially the case when the island changed from its original rice and indigo plantation use to a recreation and hunting lodge for the new owners and their guests. We boarded our pickup under cloudy skies but according to the forecast 0% chance of rain and headed north through Spanish moss-draped maritime oak forest. We definitely knew we were in the coastal south! We had three planned stops: a low tower overlooking the south end of the impoundment, a hide looking over the middle and a low tower on the other side looking over the

north end. We would also make stops for birds seen in the adjacent wet grasslands and for songbird activity along the way. As it turned out the forecast was wrong, and light rain started about half an hour into the journey, progressing to somewhat heavier around the second stop. The truck carried ponchos, and those without jackets put them on – very handy. Fortunately, the rain was not heavy to deter bird activity and stopped for our time at the lookouts. A good variety of birds was seen in a very leisurely fashion, always nice when watching wildlife. Clapper Rails were often heard calling out in the wet grassland, where both Great and Snowy Egrets were very common. White Ibis was foraging both in the grassland and in the impoundment, along with an ever-increasing number of Wood Storks. Two darker birds flew in – Glossy Ibis, only occasionally seen here. Some twenty-five Roseate Spoonbills either foraged, as one did just feet in front of the hide, or loafed in trees.

Two Bald Eagles were well spotted in a distant tree, an adult and an all-dark immature. Several Belted Kingfishers were dotted around the water. A Common Gallinule allowed close views at the hide. Also at the hide was a momma alligator and several of her young offspring, plus a somewhat larger immature perhaps from a couple of years earlier. It is a little unusual for female alligators to tolerate others near her offspring, but she seemed unconcerned. Also unconcerned was a spoonbill who was sweeping the bottom while walking directly toward the alligator; it seemed the spoonbill must have been close enough to connect with its tail but there was





no movement from the gator. This female must have been the same one I saw at this spot last year, again with small offspring. There is small a freshwater overflow pipe that feeds into the marsh at this point and apparently the water is warmed by the sun in part and maintained that way as it travels underground. So, a popular place for young alligators whose small body mass makes them more susceptible to cooling water temperature. At stops both Yellow and Prairie Warblers were seen, along with Carolina Wrens and a couple of unidentified flitter birds While at the hide a couple of small ducks were seen in the reeds, the scope revealed them to be female Blue-winged Teal. Two other ducks were seen in the distance, almost certainly Mottled Ducks – the only duck that breeds on the island – but we left the final call until we got closer on the other side. When we did, they were indeed Mottled Ducks. But not far away were similar shaped ducks, which binoculars showed to be Mallards. Tyler was surprisingly pleased to see these, but it seems this is a rare visitor, unlike over most of the rest of the South. Also close to the reeds on this side were two other large ducks, and their profile said Shovelers, which the scope confirmed. A few more Blue-winged Teal were also in the area, including a male with the distinctive white crescent on his face. A Cooper’s Hawk jetted by, and an immature Red-tailed floated high. We eventually headed back to the lodge, again through the magnificent large trees of the mature maritime forest, boughs in all sorts of shapes and festooned with Spanish Moss – actually not a moss but Tillandsia, the same genus as our most common bromeliads.

Sadly, this was our last night on Little St. Simons. Another good dinner was enjoyed, and afterwards some joined Clare for a talk on lichens, specifically how they fluoresce under UV light. The information and slides were followed by a walk around nearby trees, where here UV flashlight revealed just what she had been talking about, with lichens shining out in yellows, greens and golds. It was fascinating, and something completely new for me and the others present. Fluorescing (purple) scorpions I knew about, but not gold lichens! Our world is full of surprises.

## **Thurs., Oct. 5                      Ferry Back to the Mainland | Exploring Savannah**

Most of us enjoyed a late rising, packed and went to breakfast. With a farewell group photo, we headed back to the marina and our van. Repacking the van – we had it down to a fine art – we started back for Savannah, arriving there about 12.30. Lunch was at a Savannah institution, the Crystal Beer Palace, rather appropriate as October is Oktoberfest in Savannah. A variety of sandwiches and salads was enjoyed – all were very good – then we checked into our hotel, the historic Marshall House, opened in 1851. During the mid-1800s it functioned as a Yellow Fever hospital and then a Union Civil War hospital. Allowed to run down and closed in 1957, it was

carefully reconstructed in 1998 using much of the original materials and structure. It looks the same especially from the street as it did in the 19C.

After check-in there was free time to explore historic Savannah – the hotel is in the center of the gridded old city with its numerous old squares – and so loaded up with maps provided by the hotel most went out to see the city for a couple of hours. The hotel has a wine reception each evening, which of course we joined in. From this we walked a few minutes to another Savannah institution, The Olde Pink House restaurant on historic Reynolds Square. Built as a private mansion in 1789, it was used for several purposes after the owner died in 1799, finally settling in on being a restaurant in 1971. Carefully restored with antiques and decorations from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the restaurant reflects a style rarely now seen, including the many wait and other staff's unobtrusive attentiveness and knowledge of the menu and wines.

We had a fine dining southern dinner here, and I can vouch that the lump crab cake sandwich between fried green tomatoes was something not to be forgotten, though I've eaten many of both before. Talking over the tour we volunteered some of our favorite experiences. Everyone said the meeting with the rattlesnake was definitely a highlight. For Anne, the sand dollars on the beach were fondly recalled, for her husband Don the Bald Eagle so close. Ann really enjoyed the boat rides and Bob was very impressed with Nate's knowledge and enthusiasm, even after eight years on the island. Betty was excited about the Armadillo we saw on our return from the beach, the Seaside Sparrows and how many eagles we saw. Pete was also a fan of the boat rides. Niki couldn't decide on just one thing, but the rattlesnake and armadillos were standouts. Eventually, fully satisfied, we walked back on a warm evening to our hotel, a fine and fitting end to a wonderful tour of Georgia's coast and islands.

## **Fri., Oct. 6 Morning in Savannah | Departures**

Anne, Don, Pete and Betty were returning with me to the Hyatt to pick up their cars while I headed to the airport. Ann, Bob and Niki were staying another day or two in Savannah, so we made our farewells, all agreeing that this had been one of the most compatible groups in which they had traveled. Thank you all, and I hope to meet you on another birding adventure somewhere in the world.

*Photo Credits: Group Photo (Andrew Haffenden – AH), Roseate Spoonbill (AH), Wood Stork (AH), Yellow Warbler (AH), Alligator (AH), Black Racer (AH), Ogeechee Swamp (AH), tree fungus (AH), Group at Georgia Sea Grill (AH), Black-bellied Whistling Ducks (AH), Bottlenose Dolphin (AH), Manatee (AH), exploring Gaule Preserve (AH), Little Blue Heron (AH), Rattlesnake (AH), Black-bellied Plover (NJ Stock), Seaside Sparrow (AH), Bald Eagle (AH), Group at Myrtle Pond Lookout (AH), Wood Stork (NJ Stock), Final Dinner (AH)*