

# Georgia Coastal Birding | April 26-May 3, 2024 Trip Report | by Kent Skaggs



**Guide Kent Skaggs, with three participants: Peg, Sharon & Bob**



## **Fri., Apr. 26                      Arrival in Savannah | Savannah National Wildlife Refuge**

Our journey began in the city of Savannah. Peg had arrived earlier in the week to do some exploring on her own and Sharon and Bob came in a day early as well. We gathered in the lobby of our hotel at 2:00 PM for introductions and then we loaded into the van to go birding at the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge a short distance away. Upon arrival we set off on the Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive which was just across the state line in South Carolina. Some of the first birds encountered on this expansive refuge were Common Gallinules foraging right next to the road and Red-winged Blackbirds and Boat-tailed Grackles set up on territories within the tidal freshwater marsh that the wildlife drive passes through. Great Egrets could be seen flying in the distance along with our first Anhinga. As we drove through the marsh we added several other wading birds including Snowy Egret and Tricolored Heron and a flock of migrating Bobolinks that were mostly males decked out in their striking breeding plumage. As we continued the Bobolinks escorted us down the road to a location where we found four Blue Grosbeaks (two male and two female). Several other bird species were seen during the drive along with our first American Alligators.

It was late afternoon, so we headed back to Savannah to our hotel for a brief break before gathering again to walk to dinner at a restaurant next door. While we ate, we got to know one another a little better and we



discussed what was on the itinerary for the next day. Once finished with our meal, we retired for the evening in order to pack up as we would be hitting the road in the morning.

## **Sat., Apr. 27                      Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge | St. Simons Island**

Travel day! But first we would stop to pick up some food for a picnic lunch. After doing so we traveled a short distance to Tom Triplett Park to see what we could find there before leaving town. Once there we set out on a path that circled a lake in the park. There were lots of birds singing but few visible due to the foliage on the trees. We did see a Mississippi Kite soaring overhead and had a flyby from a Pileated Woodpecker before tracking down a couple of Great Crested Flycatchers. It was a beautiful start to the day nonetheless and all of the singing was a reminder that spring was in full swing for the birds.

We moved on and headed for our next stop, Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. After a 45-minute drive, we arrived at the start of a wildlife drive that went through a portion of the refuge. Again the air was full of bird song with White-eyed Vireo, Northern Parula and Yellow-throated Warbler singing their hearts out. We stopped briefly at the headquarters to check out some bird feeders where we had our first look at a female Painted Bunting. There was a volunteer gathering here and they were having a barbeque for lunch that smelled pretty good so we headed a little further up the road and had our lunch as well. After we finished we took a short walk up onto a dike at the southern end of Woody Pond, which is where a large rookery of wading birds is located. The rookery was mostly occupied with Wood Storks, but there was a mix of a little bit of everything here. Anhinga, Black-crowned Night Heron, Tricolored Heron, Snowy Egret, Green Heron, Western Cattle Egret, Great Egret and Great Blue Heron were all present. It was hard to say how many birds were at this rookery, but a conservative guess would be at least 1,000. We watched the activity here for about an hour, which included a few sizable American Alligators, before continuing on the wildlife drive to see what else we could find. A little further up the road we stopped to take a short walk to check out a couple of other ponds. We found a Wilson's Snipe and a Glossy Ibis and heard a Northern Bobwhite. As we were headed back to the van, we met a couple that informed us of some Roseate Spoonbills that were visible from the wildlife drive just a little further up the road. Sure enough, the spoonbills were there along with a couple of White Ibis.

From here we continued on towards St. Simons Island where we would be staying the night. We made a quick stop at Altamaha Wildlife Management Area where we saw some Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks before continuing down the road. We arrived at our lodging around 5:00 PM, got checked in and took a little break



before walking downtown to a restaurant for dinner. After some delicious seafood, we made our way back to our lodging to retire for the night.

## Sun., Apr. 28                      Jekyll Island Boat Tour | Little St. Simons Island

The group gathered for breakfast and then we loaded our bags back into the van. Our first stop was at Gould's Inlet to see what was along the water. The tide was out so a lot of the birds were at a distance, so we got them in the scope to take a closer look. Black-bellied Plover, Sanderling and Dunlin were all seen feeding on the exposed sand while larger numbers of Laughing Gull, Black Skimmer, Royal Tern and Brown Pelican were resting along the water's edge further out.

Then we headed to Jekyll Island where we had a boat tour scheduled at 10:00 AM in hopes of seeing dolphins and other critters. On the causeway into the island, we stopped briefly at the Jekyll Island Welcome Center to check out the mudflats since the tide was still out. From an observation tower we could see Semipalmated Plovers, a couple of Whimbrels, Short-billed Dowitchers and a Willet scattered about feeding. We continued on and got checked in for our boat tour. Once underway, it didn't take long for the primary target species for most of the passengers on the boat to be spotted - Tamenend's Bottlenose Dolphin. The Captain steered in the direction of where some dolphins were surfacing and before long they were all around the boat. We spent a good 20-30 minutes with the dolphins before moving on to see what else we could find. As the tour continued, the Captain provided lots of interesting information regarding Jekyll Island and the other barrier islands that make up the Golden Isles along the Georgia coast. He even passed around a fossilized tooth of a young Megalodon Shark that was found on a beach nearby. We saw several familiar birds while on the water with one new one as well in a single Black Scoter. Apparently it had missed the memo about heading north with the rest of the sea ducks.

Upon returning to the dock, we thanked the Captain and his First Mate and then were promptly seated for lunch at a restaurant right on the pier. It was so nice out we decided to sit outdoors and be entertained by Boat-tailed Grackles vying for table scraps. Then we headed back to St. Simons Island where we visited Cannon's Point Preserve before continuing on to the Hampton River Marina where we would get on the ferry to Little St. Simons Island. Once on board, it was a 15-20 minute ride to the Little St. Simons Island Lodge area. Upon arrival, staff took our bags to where we would be staying while we received an orientation on timing of meals and activities. We then went to our lodging and got cleaned up for dinner. Social hour started at 6:00 PM with dinner starting at 6:30 PM. After meeting the other folks that would be staying on the island during our stay, we enjoyed a delicious meal before retiring for the night. It had been a full day, but a new adventure was about to start.



## **Mon., Apr. 29                      Little St. Simons Island**

A leisurely start to this day as we all ventured out on our own to explore the grounds around the lodge. A continental breakfast was available at 7:30 AM with a hot breakfast at 9:00 AM. We were now on island time and all of us opted for the hot breakfast where we would find out what naturalist-led activities were planned for the morning. After breakfast we gathered our gear and met for a 10:15 AM departure for a driving tour of the northern end of the island. This was more of an interpretive tour about the flora and fauna of Little St. Simons Island with birding stops mixed in. Several familiar birds were seen including close up views of Roseate Spoonbill and a couple of new ones in Black-necked Stilt and Least Bittern.

We returned to the lodge area just in time for lunch where we learned what was in store for the afternoon. Two of our group joined a naturalist at 2:15 PM to go to the main beach to see what was along the shoreline. Several species of shorebirds were seen including American Oystercatcher, Black-bellied Plover, Wilson’s Plover, Red Knot, Sanderling and Dunlin. Several species of terns were seen as well with Least, Gull-billed, Sandwich and Royal all present. On our way back from the beach we made a quick stop at Norm’s Pond. Named after a resident American Alligator, this pond has an elevated platform allowing a bird’s-eye view of a rookery in and around the pond. There were Wood Stork, Anhinga, Tricolored Heron, Snowy Egret, Western Cattle Egret, Great Egret and Roseate Spoonbill present. One interesting find here was a young Black-crowned Night Heron in a Great Egret nest, which was an apparent first on Little St. Simons Island.

Back at the lodge area, we enjoyed some down time to get cleaned up before gathering again for some social time with the other guests and another delicious meal. Day one on the island was in the books and we were all looking forward to what was in store for us on day two.

## **Tues., Apr. 30                      Little St. Simons Island**

Another leisurely start before gathering for breakfast to find out what was on the docket for the morning. Two of the group joined a naturalist to do some kayaking on Mosquito Creek while the other two joined a naturalist to visit Norm’s Pond and Goose Pond. The kayaking crew stayed on the water for a little over an hour seeing several familiar bird species albeit from a different perspective. The other two experienced the rookery at Norm’s Pond, also seeing all of the nesting species seen the day before and the Black-crowned Night Heron masquerading as a Great Egret chick, as well as the wildlife at Goose Pond. Once back at the lodge area, we discussed what we had seen on our outings before heading to lunch.



After lunch we all opted to go on a boat tour that went out onto the Hampton River where we again saw some Tamanend's Bottlenose Dolphins. We eventually turned off of the Hampton River onto Eagle Nest Creek where we found some shorebirds waiting for the tide to go out. American Oystercatcher, Semipalmated Plover, Whimbrel, Short-billed Dowitcher, Spotted Sandpiper, Willet and Ruddy Turnstone were all seen resting or feeding on the creek's banks and some exposed mudflats. Several wading birds were seen as well, along with a Bald Eagle and an Osprey. We eventually worked our way back to where we got back on Mosquito Creek which took us back to the lodge. Two hours on the water with approximately eight miles traveled through winding, lush wetlands and beautiful weather to boot, made for a very enjoyable afternoon.

We returned to our lodging to get cleaned up a bit before heading over to socialize with the other guests before enjoying another delicious meal. Day two had provided some new experiences on the island and we were looking forward to day three.

## **Wed., May 1                      Little St. Simons Island**

Everyone was in a bit of a routine now for our morning start as each of us explored for a bit on our own prior to breakfast. We would check to see if the Painted Buntings were at the seed feeders or if any Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were visiting the hummingbird feeders. We would explore the garden area, which provided a lot of the food for our meals, for birds and butterflies and scan the creek banks for Clapper Rails that would often show themselves around sunrise.

Then it was off to breakfast and to find out what the naturalists had in store for us next. We opted to return to the main beach and Goose Pond as not everyone had been to each location. On the beach the American Oystercatchers provided good views as did the Wilson's Plovers. There were good numbers of Red Knots and some Ruddy Turnstones present as well. Near a large flock of resting Royal Terns were five Black Skimmers which we were able to get close up views with the scope. Brown Pelicans were riding the waves just off shore and a Merlin flew over the beach before catching a thermal and disappearing into the ether. We then made a quick visit to Goose Pond where we saw several bird species including Black-bellied Whistling-Duck and Glossy Ibis and a few American Alligators, with one particular youngster putting on a bit of a show in front of the blind.

Then back for lunch, a quick break and a return to Myrtle Pond which we had visited on the first morning. This time however, we would spend more time there and check out a couple of other viewing platforms that we



skipped the first time. The first platform was located on the southeast corner of the pond and there was a good variety of birds there including Blue-winged Teal, Common Gallinule, Black-necked Stilt and another Merlin. Then we checked out a blind on the east side that we had visited previously and had close up views of several Roseate Spoonbills, a Snowy Egret and a Tricolored Heron fishing. We then moved on to another platform positioned on the northwest corner. The view from this platform allowed us to see most of the pond which gave us a better idea of the total numbers of each species we had been seeing. Several Mottled Ducks were seen feeding in one area and Black-necked Stilts (at least 16) were spread across the pond. Great Egrets were scattered about and we had three Green Herons fly by. While we continued to scan an American Avocet, which was new for the trip, came flying in and landed in front of us on the other side of the pond. We quickly got it in the scope for a closer view as this striking bird was in breeding plumage.

We finished up and headed back to the lodge to get ready for our last dinner at Little St. Simons Island as we would be departing in the morning. The meal was excellent again and good company only added to the positive vibes we had been sharing during our entire stay. Then it was off to pack our things and turn in for the night.

## **Thurs., May 2                      Return to Savannah**

There was no rush to leave this morning as the ferry didn't depart until 10:00 AM, so we walked around the grounds one last time and then ate breakfast. Staff transported our bags to the ferry and we made our way there as well. With everyone on board we set back and enjoyed the scenery on the short trip back to the Hampton River Marina. It was a beautiful morning and a reminder of how pleasant the weather had been during our entire stay on Little St. Simons Island.

Back at the marina, we gathered our bags and loaded back into the van to head for Savannah. Upon arrival we headed downtown to grab a bite to eat and then went to Forsyth Park nearby for our last little bit of birding. The beautiful start to the day had continued and there were lots of people enjoying the park. We found birds that you would expect in a city park like American Robin, House Finch, Downy and Red-bellied Woodpecker and White-breasted Nuthatch and one that seemed a little out of place in a male Common Yellowthroat. After a little over an hour in the park we set off for our hotel which was also nearby. Checked in, we took a little break before meeting for dinner a couple blocks away from the hotel. While we ate, we recounted our time in Savannah and in particular on Little St. Simons Island. It had been a great trip with a lot of great memories.



## **Fri., May 3          Departures**

We all made our way to breakfast where we said our goodbyes to Sharon and Bob as they would be extending their stay in the state and beyond a little longer. Peg and Kent headed to the airport late morning and said so long there. This tour had come to an end, but there is always another adventure to be had with Naturalist Journeys.

*Photos: Tricolored Heron & Great Blue Heron (Kent Skaggs - KS), American Alligator (KS), Painted Bunting (Peg Morgan - PM), Roseate Spoonbill (KS), Common Gallinule (KS), Savannah NWR (KS), Yellow-bellied Slider (KS), Woody's Pond at Harris Neck NWR (KS), Black-crowned Night Heron (PM), American Alligator (KS), Black-Bellied Whistling-Duck (PM), Gould's Inlet on St. Simons Island (KS), Tamanend's Bottlenose Dolphins (KS), Greater Yellowlegs (PM), Laughing Gulls (KS), Ferry to Little St. Simons Island (KS), Lodge (KS), Little St. Simons Island (KS), Red Headed Woodpecker (PM), Carolina Wren (PM), Black-necked Stilt (KS), Roseate Spoonbill (KS), Least Bittern (KS), Tricolored Heron (KS), Sanderling (PM), Norm's Pond Blind (KS), Great (White) Egret (PM), Whimbrel (PM), Yellow-throated Warbler (PM), Semipalmated Plover (PM), Royal Terns with Black Skimmer (PM), American Avocet (PM), Ruby-throated Hummingbird (PM), Goose Pond (KS), American Alligator (KS)*