

# Georgia Coastal Birding: Little St. Simon Island & Savannah | Sept. 27 – Oct. 4, 2024 | by Dan Donaldson



**Guide: Dan Donaldson**

**Participants: Marsha, Marie, Kathryn, Alan & Beverly**



Georgia's coastal region is rich in both natural and cultural history. This tour included both with extensive birding along Georgia's Colonial Coast Birding Trail, St. Simons, Jekyll Island, along with visits to the culture-rich cities of Savannah and Darien.

The tour started with a quick visit to the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge - Solomon Tract, where we got our first foray into southern coastal swamp forest habitats. We stopped at several boat ramps along the many coastal river accesses in search of shorebirds and waterfowl.

Hurricane Helene, while making landfall hundreds of miles southwest of coastal Georgia, did impact this trip with high winds the evening before the trip, causing significant tree damage and power outages. While we never experienced power outages directly, some of our planned destinations did, resulting in the area's National Wildlife Refuges being closed, and Little St. Simon unable to accommodate us as planned. We adapted well and quickly rearranged the trip for maximum birding. We spent much more time on beautiful Jekyll and St. Simons



Islands, visited a bird banding station, and explored smaller coastal areas that would not have been visited otherwise.

We still enjoyed Wood Storks, Roseate Spoonbills, Painted Buntings (in hand), hundreds of White Ibises, and had an amazing experience with Clapper Rails along the roads surrounding Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. We explored the town of Darien, including a wonderful sunset birding boat tour along the Altamaha River and its tidal marshes.

### **Fri., Sept. 27: Arrival Day | Savannah NWR - Solomon Tract**

It's arrival day for the group. Some of us came in a day early and did some pre-trip exploring in the area. One of the bands of Hurricane Helene extended from landfall in the Gulf all the way to the Atlantic Coast where we had high winds and rain overnight. By morning we had clear skies (and did for the rest of the trip). We were fortunate and did not lose power or experience significant damage. Everyone arrived as planned and we were ready to go at 3:00pm for an afternoon outing.

We first headed to the Houlihan Boat Ramp for a quick look for some water birds. We picked up our first of many Boat-tailed Grackles, local Laughing Gulls, and Double-crested Cormorants of the trip. We then went to a satellite property of the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge; a property called the Solomon Tract. This was a treat and our first experience in southern swamp forest habitat. The trail here is on an abandoned road that kept us out of the water, but made for great birding and botanizing. The birding was lighter than our pre-trip visit (post storm) but American Redstarts and mixed flocks of warblers were still here and fed oh so high in the towering pines that ID was impossible. Common Yellowthroats and Carolina Wrens were a constant presence on both sides of the trail.

We then returned to our hotel and met for dinner at the adjacent restaurant - Sam Snead's Oak Grill.

### **Sat., Sept. 28: Harris Neck NWR | Shellman Bluff Rd | Altamaha State Wildlife Unit**

Due to post storm conditions, we had to rearrange our itinerary. Unfortunately, Harris Neck and other regional national wildlife refuges were closed because operations staff were all mobilized and sent to Florida to assist in the recovery efforts of the heavily impacted refuges in Florida.

We made the most of it by birding the roads surrounding Harris Neck NWR, which had very similar habitats and birds. This included a bridge over a tidal saltmarsh creek near the entrance to the refuge where we had an



amazing experience with Clapper Rails. The tide was outgoing, and Clapper Rails were moving into the newly exposed channels and mudflats near the bridge where we were standing. “There’s another one, and another one”, as we had a “rail” of up to 9 or so rails, darting back and forth, grunting and bickering right in front of us. We even saw them bathing in the puddles in the small creeks that cut into the marsh. Other birds seen from the bridge include Wood Storks, Snowy and Great egrets, Little Blue Herons, many White Ibises, Northern Harriers and several Belted Kingfishers.

Utilizing fishing access points, bridge pull-offs and parking areas, we birded Shellman Bluff Road where we observed Spotted Sandpipers, Anhinga, Roseate Spoonbills, Yellow-crowned Night Herons, a Tri-colored Heron, and Great Egrets.

We made our way to the historic town of Darien, where we bought subs and had a picnic lunch in the riverfront park in town. We birded the Darien area after lunch, mainly the Altamaha River Wildlife Area, where we birded from an observation tower and walked along a dike-top trail. From the tower we viewed many Yellow Warblers and Common Yellowthroats. The walk along the dikes gave us great looks at the many Common Gallinules that were in the nearby ponds. We were attracted to a strange call coming from deep in the reeds and to our delight, it was a flock of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks that gave us a couple nice flybys as they moved from pond to pond.

After a full day of birding, we made our way back to Savannah to our hotel, dinner, and bird list review.

### **Sun., Sept. 29: St. Simons Island | Higbee Beach | Salt Marsh Boat Tour**

Today we began our true coastal birding and headed to St. Simons Island, but not without a quick stop at the Harris Neck Road Bridge that has been so good to us. The birding was lighter, with herons and kingfishers. Our best encounter here was with a 10-plus-foot alligator that was patrolling the waters around the bridge. The road to the boat ramp was open, so we made a quick stop there and picked up Willets for the trip. Another roadside stop at a roost of over 40 Wood Storks, Anhingas, more White Ibises, and Roseate Spoonbills, topped off our morning.

Arriving on St. Simons, our first stop was at Goulds Inlet. There’s a nice beach here in an area where the tidal marshes mix with the waters of the Atlantic. It was low tide conditions and over 100 Brown Pelicans were resting just offshore on a large sandbar. Least Sandpipers foraged the newly exposed sandbars as Royal Terns and Laughing Gulls flew overhead in the sunshine. The boisterous Boat-tailed Grackles are here as well and a Peregrine made nice, low pass to round out our morning.



We picked up lunch and enjoyed a wonderful picnic at Massingale Park underneath southern classic moss-covered oaks. A quick walk through the parks took us out to the beach, where a large temporary wetland forms during high tides. Tri-colored Herons were here working the receding water, as were Snowy and Great Egrets. A small scrub of trees in the corner of the parking lot had a flock of Palm Warblers actively feeding, along with Northern Mocking Birds and Blue Jays.

We changed our hotel location today. The lodge at Little St. Simons was out of commission from the storm, so we stayed the next couple days in nearby Darien along the Darien River. We checked in, then head down to the marina and boarded a comfortable Pontoon boat that was perfect for taking us on a Darien/Altamaha river and salt marsh boat tour. Captain Paul was a career Georgia fish and wildlife biologist who knew as much about the amazing history of the Darien area as he did the flora and fauna, including a complete history of the shrimping industry and a primer on how to shop for shrimp. He was the perfect guide for our sunset birding tour.

### **Mon., Sept. 30: Full day on Jekyll Island**

Jekyll Island is less developed than St. Simons and is a wonderful birding location. The entrance to Jekyll is a long causeway through salt marsh with a nice visitor center and observation platform right before you drive onto the island. We will stop here at the tower often in the days ahead under varying tide conditions. The usual herons were here, including Tri-colored and Yellow-crowned and a group of Cliff Swallows rounded out our stop here.

Next, once on the island, we birded many locations; from beach and forest birding trails to stops at picnic areas. Perhaps the most interesting stop today was Driftwood Beach. Here, the shoreline is experiencing erosion, thus creating a landscape of sandy beach with hundreds of trees and logs that have now faded to gray. It was a beach landscape like no other we would experience on this trip. Osprey were busy here and Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderlings worked the waters edge between the logs.

We returned to the visitor center tower at low tide in the afternoon, and as suspected, it was much birdier. Marsh Wrens were foraging and calling at our feet and Clapper Rails were observed running across the exposed mudflat from creek to creek. Black-bellied and Semi-palmated plovers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Willets, Wood Storks, White Ibises and Roseate Spoonbills were all here along with all the expected herons.



## **Tues., Oct 1: St. Simons Island | Jekyll Island**

We found a great little breakfast spot in Darien - The Shanty Café - that had just enough outdoor seating for our group. Having coffee with Fish Crows, Eastern Kingbirds, Northern Mockingbirds while we waited for our breakfast was a nice treat.

We birded St. Simons and Jekyll Island again today, as we waited to hear if Little St. Simon would become available. Goulds Inlet was such a good stop yesterday morning, we headed straight there this morning. It's a good thing we did. It was a beautiful sunny morning, and the birding here was fantastic. The tide was on it's way down and the newly exposed sand flats were loaded with shorebirds. The usual suspects were here, but we added a large flock of Least Sandpipers, Caspian Terns, 90+ Black Skimmers, Sandwich Terns, 100+ Royal Terns, more Roseate Spoonbills, easily 500 Brown Pelicans that must have roosted overnight on the sandspit, and Osprey, that all made for a great morning.

After Lunch we returned to Jekyll Island and birded an area known as the Amphitheater. It was a long-abandoned concrete amphitheater from times gone by. Now overgrown and graffitied up, it was a wonderful birding location with woodland trails, a pond, and a distinct forest edge that was rich with birds. A Yellow-billed Cuckoo was the star of the show and sat long enough for us to get great scope looks and plenty of photos. Eastern Wood Pewee, Blue Jays, and Swainson's Thrush all worked the forest edge along with Palm, Northern Parula, American Redstart and Common Yellowthroat warblers. The nearby pond gave us great looks at resting Yellow-crowned Night Herons and Belted Kingfishers.

We spent the night again in Darien and dined on local seafood (shrimp) at Skipper's Fish Camp.

## **Wed., Oct. 2: Jekyll Island**

Today we learned that Little St. Simon Island was off the table, so we devoted the rest of our time to thoroughly bird Jekyll Island. There were still highly rated spots that we hadn't visited. We started our day in the South Beach area. Here, at the southern tip of the island, migrating birds tend to congregate in the vast vegetated dune complex. Common Yellowthroats dominated, but we also had wonderful looks at White-eyed Vireos, Chestnut-sided and Yellow-throated warblers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks.

The Jekyll Island Campground kept a very nice feeding station in a wooded area at the edge of the property. It was active with Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmouses, Boat-tailed Grackles, a very cooperative Ovenbird, American Redstarts, and our first Painted Bunting of the trip.



After a wonderful lunch at The Wharf, we hiked the Horton Pond area. Anhinga, Black-crowned Night, and Great Blue herons favored this pond which can also be a reliable spoonbill roost, but not today. The woodland trails were very nice and gave us a wonderful encounter with a Brown-headed Nuthatch; perhaps the cutest bird of the trip and a lifer for most. Pine and American Redstart Warblers were here in good numbers along with White-eyed Vireos.

After a full day of birding on the island, we ended our birding day with a flock of American White Pelicans along the FJ Torra Causeway that lead back to the mainland.

### **Thurs., Oct. 3: Jekyll Island Banding Station | Transition to Savannah**

We had about a half day to spend in the area before transitioning back to Savannah, so we decided to hit Jekyll Island again. We made quick stops at the causeway visitor center again to view the regular suspects, checked the feeders at the campground, then headed to South Beach to bird the woodland dunes. Upon arrival at south beach, we were happy to see that a banding station was up and running. We followed the signs through the dunes and upon arrival we found the banding station overwhelmed with birds. There were about 60 birds in bags waiting to be processed with a lone volunteer processing them. The other volunteers were out checking nets again. We pitched in and Dan assisted with the processing (Dan has banding experience). Others in the group helped check nets and brought birds back to the processing tent. We had a wonderful morning seeing Mockingbirds, Cardinals, and Common Yellowthroats in hand and took turns releasing them. The best bird of the morning was a beautiful female Painted Bunting for which the lead bander gave us a quick photo session and life history before releasing her.

We left Jekyll Island late in the morning so that we'd be back in Savannah in time for lunch at the historic Olde Pink House restaurant in the heart of old Savannah. The shrimp and grits were amazing. We then checked into our hotel, the Marshal House, and met up in the afternoon for a historic trolley tour of downtown. It was a windy tour through historic downtown and we went by all 18 squares with a narrated story for each.

Our last dinner together was at Vic's on the River, which is located right in the old dock areas along the Savannah River.

## **Fri., Oct. 4: Departures**

The Marshal House had a terrific breakfast. We had some free time to explore Savannah on our own this morning; some went to a favorite author's house; others did some shopping. We checked out at 11:00am and made our way to the airport. We said our good-byes, made sure we exchanged contact information and headed off to our gates.

*Photos: Osprey (Alan Moore - AM), Roseate Spoonbill (AM), Butterfly (AM), Great White Heron (AM), Frog(AM), Wood Stork Roost (AM), Group Birding (Kay Rhoads - KR), Juvenile Alligator (AM), Harbor (AM), Butterfly (AM), Ruddy Turnstone (AM), Beach Scenic (KR), Group Birding (KR), Black-crowned Night Heron (AM)*