

South Carolina: Southern Charm | Trip Report

October 18 – 25, 2018 | Written by Guide Pat Lueders



Pat Lueders, tour guide, with participants Jean, Ellen & Jane



Wed., Oct. 18 Drive from Charleston to Savannah

We rendezvous in downtown Charleston and become acquainted as we drive historical Highway 17 to Savannah, getting our first views of the South Carolina low country and the ACE Basin area. This is the first visit to the area for Ellen and Jean, but Jane grew up in Charleston, and she introduces the group to boiled peanuts after stopping at the Carolina Cherry Company for tastes of cider and other local southern specialties.

After lunch at the historic Crystal Beer Parlor, open since the early 1900s, we begin our downtown tour of some of the 22 park-like squares that retain the



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original town plan prescribed by founder James Oglethorpe. We visit the Mercer-Williams House, the scene of the shooting death made famous in the 1994 John Berendt book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, which put the city of Savannah on the map. There is a different church on each square, many open for tours, including the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist which we visit. Interesting small shops featuring unique items line the streets and are visited by our group. Forsyth Park is home to the impressive Forsyth Fountain and many of the city birds we find, including American Robins and our first Eastern Phoebe.



After checking in to the centrally located Marshall House, we walk a few short blocks to the Olde Pink House, Savannah's only 18th Century mansion, where we enjoy our first of many delicious low country Southern meals.



Thurs., Oct. 19 Visit to Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

After a delicious southern breakfast that includes grits and biscuits and gravy, we drive over the impressive Talmadge Memorial Bridge, crossing the Savannah River into South Carolina, to tour the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge. The Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive meanders along four miles of earthen dikes providing close views of the birds and wildlife that call this freshwater marsh home. At the entrance, we find Gray Catbird, Eastern Phoebe, Carolina Wren, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and our first of many Palm Warblers. We stop for scope comparisons of Snowy and immature Little Blue Heron, both having white plumage. American Alligators are seen in the water and loafing on the dikes, and Cattle Egret stand along the road



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for close views. Common Gallinules are plentiful, and we hear King Rail and Sora. White Ibis are perched in trees along the dikes, and a pair of Glossy Ibis fly low and provide us a fleeting look.

We walk a trail in the bottomland hardwoods and have close looks at a Black-throated Blue Warbler, a female Common Yellowthroat, vocalizing House Wrens, many Gray Catbirds, and more Palm Warblers, our most numerous species of the day.



A walk on the Beech Hill Nature Trail after our picnic lunch at the visitor's center is very informative, with plant identification signage and good looks at a female Scarlet Tanager, a quick look at a Worm-eating Warbler, a Black-and-White Warbler sighted by Jean, female American Redstarts, and Yellow-rumped Warblers.

On our return to Savannah, to Ellen's delight we spot our first Roseate Spoonbill flying low over the marsh, one of the species she was hoping to see. After the complimentary wine and cheese reception at our hotel, we enjoy their night history talk in the library, a great way to learn about the historic Marshall House and Savannah.

Fri., Oct. 20 Tour of the ACE Basin

After another delicious breakfast, we depart Savannah to tour the historic ACE Basin area of South Carolina, located between Savannah and Charleston. This unique estuarine system provides invaluable habitat for a rich diversity of birds. Our first stop is the Donnelley Wildlife Management Area, and we travel the driving tour through a large variety of habitats. We hear and get looks at Pine Warblers and Brown-headed Nuthatches. The pond at Mary's Island is a bonanza with two trees full of perched Roseate Spoonbills, wading Tricolored Herons in the water, soaring Wood Stork, Black and Turkey Vultures, and Bald Eagles. Belted Kingfishers announce their presence, and Swamp and Song Sparrows are spotted in the reeds. After a picnic lunch at the check station area populated by a huge flock of Brown-headed Cowbirds, we stop at

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a meadow to enjoy Eastern Bluebirds, Chipping Sparrows, a Rusty Blackbird, and American Goldfinch.

The next location we tour is Bear Island Wildlife Management Area, one of the best birding areas in the state. Located along the Ashepoo River, we find our first ducks including a Southern specialty, Mottled Duck, and American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, and numerous Pied-billed Grebes. At the end of Bennett's Point Road, we excitedly view a flock of 36 American Avocet that fly over and around us, hoping they land close.

We arrive at our Patriot's Point hotel in Mt. Pleasant, complete the day's checklist beachside, and then enjoy a delicious dinner at a Shem Creek restaurant as shrimp boats arrive from the ocean with their bounty.



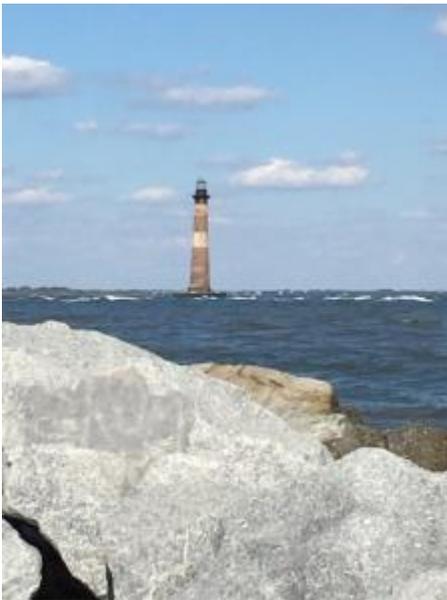
Sat., Oct. 21 Pitt St. Causeway, Sullivan's Island, Ft. Moultrie

Timing is everything, and we begin today with excellent timing! We arrive at the Pitt St. causeway at the end of low tide, the perfect time to get good looks at marsh birds. As the tide comes in, we see Saltmarsh and Savannah Sparrows perched up on reeds to avoid the incoming water. Our target bird for this area, the elusive Seaside Sparrow, can best be viewed as the tide comes in, and we find a few adults and juveniles about 10 feet in front of us in a bush. High fives for Jean, as both these specialty sparrows are "lifers!" Jane spots a very close Clapper Rail on the sand in front of us, and we quietly watch him feed. Ellen points out a Brown Thrasher lurking in a bush above the sparrows. Along with these exciting sightings, we have a Wood Stork feeding and two on a nest in a tree above the homes. We have our first sighting of a pair of Osprey, and the piers are covered with loafing Sandwich, Royal, and Forester's Terns, Laughing Gulls, Brown Pelican, and Ruddy Turnstone. A large flock of Black Skimmers flies past the pier in the Charleston Bay.

We visit Sullivan's Island beach and find a flock of Red Knot, Black-bellied Plovers, and Willet amongst the numerous Sanderlings that are running in and out of the surf. At Ft. Moultrie, a short visit to the museum is followed by a view of an American Oystercatcher on the pier near a perched flock of 15 Willet.

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After lunch at Poe's Tavern, named for Edgar Allen Poe who lived on Sullivan's Island at the age of 18 after enlisting in the Army, we drive to the Francis Marion National Forest in search of another specialty, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, found by its vocalizations. We drive the area, hearing them in a few locations, but not getting good looks ... we will return!

Dinner is at the seafood restaurant at our resort with a view of the sunset over downtown Charleston and the bay.

Sun., Oct. 22 Folly Island Pier | Folly "Washout" | Morris Lighthouse Inlet

We leave Mount Pleasant to visit Folly Island, a charming beach town just south of Charleston. The Folly Beach pier extends 1045 feet into the Atlantic Ocean, giving closer views of seabirds. As we walk out on the pier, we see Herring, Ring-billed, and Laughing Gulls on the beach, and watch a large number of surfers enjoying the waves below the pier. Boat-billed Grackles watch for free food from the fishermen. We drive towards the Morris Island lighthouse, stopping at the Folly "washout" area to check the docks at high tide. Jane finds our first Spotted Sandpiper below the docks, which are lined with hundred of terns and gulls for nice size and field mark comparisons.

The trail to the Morris Island lighthouse is windy, but we find a Magnolia Warbler and a female Common Yellowthroat. Near the lighthouse we identify a few Caspian Terns in with Royal Terns. On our return, House Wren and Carolina Wren are vocalizing from the brush.

After lunch at Black Magic on Folly Island during a thunderstorm, we drive to the Angel Tree, a Southern live oak on John's Island believed to be around 400 years old and 28 feet in circumference. We arrive at our hotel in order to enjoy dinner from their rooftop restaurant high above the Ashley River with views of Downtown Charleston.

Mon., Oct. 23 Magnolia Plantation | Audubon Swamp Trail

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No visit to Charleston is complete without visiting one of their historic plantations. We visit Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, selected as one of “America’s Most Beautiful Gardens,” founded in 1676 by the Drayton Family. We first bird the Audubon Swamp Garden, a cypress and tupelo swamp, home to nesting herons and American Alligators. It is said that John James Audubon visited here and collected his Anhinga specimen. We view a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in the scope and try to count the large number of Yellow-rumped Warblers. Ellen and Jean had hoped to see the beautiful Wood Duck, and we find 30 males, females, and juveniles. We have good looks at Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and White-eyed Vireo. We walk to the river and find two Anhinga along the banks, drying their wings.



Before lunch we take the “From Slavery to Freedom: The Magnolia Cabin Project Tour.” Begun more than five years ago, it is an effort to preserve five historic structures that date back to 1850. This is a way to recognize the importance the vital role that the Gullah people and culture plays in any interpretation of low country history.



We return to our hotel in time for a short rest, and then we enjoy another delicious gourmet meal at a locally owned low country restaurant on John’s Island.

Tues., Oct. 24 Francis Beidler Audubon Center | Charleston Bay

Today we visit Beidler Forest, the world’s largest virgin cypress-tupelo swamp forest and a pristine ecosystem untouched for millennia. At the Audubon Center, there is an extensive 1.75-mile boardwalk that weaves through the quiet flow of blackwater. We start with good views of the striking Red-headed Woodpecker and eventually add Hairy, Downy, Pileated, Red-bellied, Northern Flicker, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. We find another Black-throated Blue Warbler, but only get quick looks at a Northern Parula. Another Anhinga is found along the channel. White Ibis are feeding on the floor of the swamp.



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We return to downtown Charleston to take the Charleston Bay cruise to Ft. Sumter. There, at the fort named for South Carolina Revolutionary War patriot Thomas Sumter, the opening shots of the Civil War were fired on April 12, 1861. Many Black Skimmers are loafing on a pier across the bay as we depart. We find shorebirds at the fort's beach including three Dunlin and two Willet. We return in time to enjoy a horse drawn carriage tour of downtown Charleston.



Our parting dinner is enjoyed at the nationally recognized Poogan's Porch on Queen Street, featuring a fresh approach to low country cuisine. We are sorry that our adventure is nearing an end, but we all agree that it has been an exciting and rewarding journey through the charming South!

Wed., Oct. 25 Francis Marion National Forest | Departures

Jane has to depart, but Jean, Ellen, and I try one more time for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. We drive slowly, listening for their vocalizations, hearing them a few times. We turn around and are slowly leaving when Pat hears them clearly. We walk the road and quickly find one near a marked tree. It flies towards and lands close to us so we can get good looks and pictures. High fives again, another life bird! What a wonderful way to end this delightful tour!

All photos by Pat Lueders, except Sora by Sandy Sorkin, Black-and-white Warbler by Peg Abbott, and Roseate Spoonbill by Betty Andres.