

Georgia Coastal Birding | Trip Report

April 8-15, 2022 | by Jon Atwood



With guide Jon Atwood and participants Carol, David, Herb, Larry, Lauren, Roslyn, Sharon, and Susan.



Although not present on the trip, Naturalist Journey's guide Pat's Lueders', planning and advice were evident and appreciated throughout our exploration of this very special region.

Sat., Apr. 9

Arrivals in Savannah | Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge | St. Simon's Island

Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. After picking up food for our picnic lunch, we left Savannah and drove to Harris Neck NWR. Acquired by the Nature Conservancy from 1980-2001, the refuge includes more than 2,700 acres of saltwater marsh, freshwater impoundments, mixed deciduous forests and open fields - a perfect mix of habitats to find locally breeding waders and migrating songbirds, many of which would be heading north to Canada's boreal forest after spending the winter months in the Caribbean and Central America. At Woody Pond we found Anhingas, Little Blue Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets, Tricolored Herons, Green Herons, White Ibis, Wood Storks, Black-necked Stilt, Solitary Sandpiper and Roseate Spoonbills. Songbirds - many heard, and some seen! - included White-eyed Vireos, Yellow-throated Warblers (how can such a beautiful bird be so hard to see???), Northern Parulas, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, and Barn Swallows. We saw small,



medium, and large alligators. At the refuge entrance, we ate our picnic lunch under live oaks draped in Spanish moss. After leaving this great spot we arrived at our hotel on St. Simons Island, located across the street from a lighthouse and the sound. In the midst of Spring Break for many colleges, this was a hopping place! After a fabulous dinner, we drove back to our hotel (noting some Eastern Bluebirds on a fence bordering a small airstrip), briefly talked about tomorrow's plans, and reviewed the sightings from our first full day in coastal Georgia. With more excitement planned for tomorrow, we said our good-nights and headed for bed.

Sun., Apr. 10 Little St. Simons Island | Jekyll Island

During an early morning walk right outside our hotel we saw Carolina Chickadees, a Brown Thrasher, a pair of Eastern Bluebirds, Ospreys, and Brown Pelicans. After breakfast, we drove to Gould's Inlet, a sandbar on the Atlantic Ocean that was covered with shorebirds. Least Sandpipers, Black Skimmers, Royal Terns, Brown Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, Semipalmated Plovers, a single Red Knot, Willets, Forster's Terns, Sanderlings, Marbled Godwit, Black-bellied Plover. Many of these shorebirds are the true marathoners of the bird world - after spending the winter months in South America, they are now heading to their breeding grounds in the Arctic, where they will arrive soon after snow melt, set up nesting territories, lay eggs, raise their young, then turn around in late July to head back to South America. We talked a bit about conservation of Piping Plover and Least Tern nesting sites on busy public beaches. It was a perfectly dazzling morning.



We then drove across the Jekyll Island causeway, stopping to bird in excellent forest habitat near the Amphitheater - Northern Parulas, White-eyed Vireo, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Hermit Thrush. Most of us finally got looks at a Great Crested Flycatcher - after hearing “weeps” from many different individuals that never showed themselves. We enjoyed lunch on the wharf before boarding a private tour boat to explore the Intracoastal Waterway and look for bottlenose dolphins. A group of about 15 dolphins basically played in the water next to our boat for about an hour - an exciting experience that we loved sharing with several children who were also with us - these future naturalists and conservationists will undoubtedly remember this remarkable experience for the rest of their lives. Returning to our inn on St. Simons Island, we changed for dinner, then afterward we talked briefly about tomorrow’s plans and reviewed our sightings from the day. The bottlenose dolphins and Royal Terns were voted as “critters of the day”. Off to bed!

Mon., Apr. 11 Birding Little St. Simons Island

Leaving our hotel on St Simons Island - after a sunrise that clearly showed why this area is called the Golden Isles - we drove to the north end of the island to meet the ferry transporting us down Mosquito Creek for our three-day stay on Little St. Simons Island. While waiting for the ferry’s arrival, 2 manatees repeatedly surface in the adjacent channel - a sighting that apparently happens very seldom at this location. Privately owned and accessible only by boat, The Lodge on Little St. Simons Island has accommodations for a small number of guests, and we were fortunate to be included in that number! Under the expert guidance of naturalist Alli Smith, we birded in amazing forest habitat (Northern Parulas, Blue-headed Vireo, Red-headed Woodpecker, Hooded Warbler, Orchard Oriole, Summer Tanager), and from a blind overlooking a flooded area watched hundreds of waterbirds and shorebirds, including Roseate Spoonbills, Blue-winged Teal, Tricolored Herons, American



Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Willets, Black-bellied Plovers, Least Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Bonaparte's Gull. Two family groups of Common Gallinules, with their black puffball chicks, foraged on a mudflat. As we watched from the blind a Louisiana Waterthrush, foraging alongside a small wet area, captured and ate a small, approximately inch long fish! - lots of protein to fuel its northward migration toward New England. Others in our group took the opportunity to go kayaking, where they saw Clapper Rails and Marsh Wren. Returning to the lodge for happy hour, while waiting for dinner a pair of Painted Buntings graced a closeby feeder, and we saw the first Ruby-throated Hummingbird of the trip. Dinner was delightful, and afterwards we reviewed the day's observations and prepared for what we might see in the morning. Off to bed!

Tues., Apr. 12

Little St. Simons Island | Norm's Pond | Goose Pond

Our first full day on Little St Simons Island! Close to paradise - mid-70's degree F, light wind, blue skies. We applied our bug spray and donned our mosquito shirts and were off for a pre-breakfast boat ride in the nearby saltmarsh. Clapper Rails were calling around us, but so far have been hiding in the marsh grass. Marsh Wrens sang and allowed us brief views, and a Seaside Sparrow - although skulking in the vegetation - was seen by most. A sea turtle (green?) briefly surfaced but was too shy to be really identified. After breakfast we headed off to Norm's Pond (named after the large alligator which lived there or was it the other way around?). Nesting Wood Storks, Great and Snowy Egrets, Tricolored Herons, Roseate Spoonbills, and White Ibis blanketed the low trees



adjacent to our shady (and bug-free) blind. Most of the birds were in the early stages of nesting. Romance was in the air, with birds presenting sticks to mates, squabbling over prime nesting locations, and showing off their showy nuptial plumes. At this one site we saw evidence of an important conservation story: the fancy plumes of egrets directly led to creation of Audubon societies in the early 1900's, which were formed to protect these birds from the terrible slaughter associated with the trade in feathers sought for women's hats. Eventually these early conservationists succeeded in passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which continues to be a critical piece of federal legislation protecting birds in the western hemisphere. The birds we saw were evidence of how private citizens can affect important conservation success. Next, we stopped briefly at Goose Pond, which had not as many birds, but added a few species to our day's list: Common Yellowthroat, Savannah Sparrow, Palm Warbler, Green Heron, Common Gallinule. We headed back to the Lodge for lunch and get ready for afternoon outings to a nearby beach or to kayaking in the marsh. The beach proved wonderful, with Sanderlings, Piping and Wilson's Plovers, Ruddy Turnstone and Black-bellied Plover. And - a life bird for several - a pair of Mottled Ducks, which look like washed-out versions of American Black Ducks. Jon had a quick look at a distant Least Tern, recently arrived from South America, as well as the south end of a northward-flying Caspian Tern. Another fabulous day - we can't wait for tomorrow!

Wed., Apr. 13

Little St. Simons Island | Spoonbills Galore!

Our final full day at this magical place, where it feels like new discoveries still await even though we've done so much exploring for the last couple of days. Our day started with an amusing attempt to see a Clapper Rail, which Jon was certain he had cornered in a tiny patch of saltmarsh. But - when he tried to flush the bird into the open, it had vanished! Fortunately, a few minutes later it reappeared nearby and was seen by many of our group, thus helping Jon feel that he had not, after all, lost his mind! And finally seeing the male Painted Bunting that had earlier eluded us was also a good pre-breakfast sighting.



For our morning adventures our group split between kayaking, beach walking, and driving to heron rookeries. The birds were all like what we've seen the last couple of days, but who can be tired of such spectacular critters? Oh, "it's just another Roseate Spoonbill" was not a thought that ever crossed any of our minds. In the afternoon many of us went on a Reptile Safari, where our expert guides told us about alligator behavior, fish-eating snakes, and finally - the pièce de résistance - a beautiful, newly molted Eastern diamondback rattlesnake. Fabulous! Dinner - bird list - getting packed up to leave in the morning. This will be a super hard place to say goodbye to.

Thurs., Apr. 14 Return to Savannah | Departures

The final day of our Coastal Birding trip involved more travel and logistics than birding! We said "goodbye" to new friends at Little St Simons Island - a magical place that we all want to come back to! As we boarded our ferry to return to the mainland, Clapper Rails called from the salt marsh and an adult Bald Eagle perched on a channel marking sign. It was hard to leave. After returning to Savannah, we had lunch at the Crystal Beer Palace - a historic restaurant that has been around since the early 1900s. Old photos on the wall reminded us of the history of this famous city. Before checking in to the historic Marshall House, set in a landmark building dating from 1851, we sauntered through several parks and cemeteries, and heard from a local tour guide about the founding and expansion of Savannah, known for its well-preserved architecture and rich, vibrant history. Appropriately, in this important and historic American city, familiar American Robins ran about tombstones commemorating settlers from Georgia's earliest days as one of the 13 original colonies. And lots of Confederate war heroes. Amazing! After another fabulous meal together, we had to say our goodbye's, since early departures the next day would send us off in different directions. We had such a terrific time on this trip that it's hard to pick specific high points. Close looks at nesting Wood Storks - squabbling egrets in full breeding plumage - Roseate Spoonbills dressed in shocking pink - Glossy Ibis that were really glossy. Dolphins, alligators. Our list of Critters of the Day could go on and on.

And in addition to seeing lots of gorgeous and interesting birds, beautiful and different habitats, and eating scrumptious meals, I felt that one of the best parts of the trip was that we all became good friends. I think all of us hope that our paths will cross again in the days to come.

Photo Credits: Jon Atwood (Anhinga; alligator; birding at Harris Neck NWR; Harris Neck NWR; Lighthouse at St Simons Island; sunrise birding on St Simons Island; beach at Gould's Inlet; Piping Plover / Least Tern nesting signs; Royal & Forster's terns, Black Skimmers; Black-necked Stilt; Dolphin Tour boat; Golden Isles sunrise; ferry to Little St Simons Island; Louisiana Waterthrush with fish; Roseate Spoonbills; Snowy Egret; Roseate Spoonbill; Wood Stork; Wilson's Plover; Crystal Beer Palace; group ready to say goodbye)