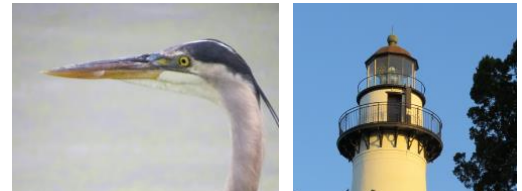


Georgia Coastal Birding | Trip Report

April 27 - May 3, 2023 | by Jon Atwood



With guide Jon Atwood and six participants: Bill, Carol, Dori, Paul, Pauline and Suzanna



Arrivals in Savannah

We began our exploration of coastal Georgia at a large park that was conveniently close to our lodging at the Hyatt Place Savannah Airport. Tom Trippet Park, helpfully identified as an eBird hotspot, allowed us time to chat and become acquainted with each other while walking leisurely on trails that bordered a large fishing lake and wander through woodlands typical of coastal Georgia. Birding was surprisingly good, especially considering that we arrived at the park late in the afternoon. Highlights were a super-cooperative Great Crested Flycatcher at eye level, rather than their often more typical position high in the canopy, as well as a group of five Swallow-tail ed Kites, one of the most graceful birds in the world. White and Glossy Ibis flew over, and Pil eated Woodpeckers called from the forest. We had time to quickly return to our hotel, briefly checking a small tangle of trees behind



the hotel where there were a few nesting egrets. Then off to Vic's on the River - an excellent restaurant located in Savannah's Old City.

Fri., April 28 **Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge | St. Simons Lighthouse Inn**

After driving through an extensive neighborhood dominated by mature live oaks festooned with Spanish moss, we arrived at Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. The first birds we saw were several dazzling male Painted Buntings, attracted to the feeders at the refuge headquarters. Northern Cardinals were everywhere, and we became familiar with the buzzy snap of the Northern Parula's song that we would enjoy throughout the remainder of our trip. The prime attraction here is Woody Pond, a large flooded area where USFWS has successfully encouraged Wood Storks to establish a large nesting colony. In addition to the storks, we saw lots of Black-crowned Night-Herons, Tricolored Herons, Anhingas, Great Blue Herons and Snowy and Great Egrets. Several large American alligators bellowed their territorial cries along the wetland's edge, making the "No Swimming" signs a bit unnecessary. Carolina Chickadees, Eastern Towhees and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers were all common. By the time we headed back to lunch tables at the refuge's entrance, we already were dazzled by the diversity of birds in this region. After a short drive, we arrived at our hotel for the next two nights on St. Simons Island, located adjacent to a scenic lighthouse. We walked to dinner at the Georgia Sea Grill, where the food was so good that we decided to return the following night!

Sat., April 29 **St. Simons Lighthouse Inn | Gould's Inlet | Jekyll Island Dolphin Boat Cruise**

Before an early breakfast at the Inn, we had a chance to enjoy diving Brown Pelicans and Royal Terns. Also present were a few land birds: Eurasian Collared-Dove, an introduced species that is expanding rapidly throughout North America, was new for some people. Eastern Bluebirds were nesting in holes in the live oaks. Our first stop was at Gould's Inlet, an extensive area of sandbars bordering a popular sandy beach. Although the tide level prevented us from a close approach, nonetheless we saw a good diversity of shorebirds (Black-bellied



Before heading to lunch, we stopped on Jekyll Island at a local hotspot for migrating songbirds known as The Amphitheater. Trees surrounding a mid-sized pond gave us our first looks at one of this trip's iconic species: Roseate Spoonbill. Also in the large trees were a Black-and-white Warbler and a Black-throated Blue Warbler, probably en route to their nesting grounds in New England or Canada. After lunch we took a cruise through some of Jekyll Island's waterways in hopes of finding common bottlenose dolphins. At first we only saw a few, but near the end of the boat ride we found a group of 15 or more, including some that were actually leaping from the water. Very fun! We were also distracted by a large flock of Black Skimmers, Royal Terns and Brown Pelicans loafing on a sandy point. Back to the Lighthouse Inn, then dinner at the Georgia Sea Grill. Yum.

Sun., April 30 Cannons Point and Guale Preserves | Little St. Simons Island (LSSI)

After packing up our luggage, we headed off toward the marina where later in the day we would catch our boat to Little St. Simons Island (LSSI), which really was the primary destination of this tour. But we had a few hours before the LSSI ferry, which gave us a chance to explore a couple of nearby preserves new to Naturalist Journeys. Cannons Point Preserve in particular was exceptional, giving us great looks at singing Painted Buntings and White-eyed Vireo, which despite hearing everywhere, we found difficult to actually see. Yellow-throated Warblers were common and vocal. But the big surprise was a White-winged Dove, a species that is common in the desert areas of North America but considered vagrant in the southeast states.

Our excitement over arriving at LSSI was not ill-founded. What a fabulous location: lodging, staff and the surrounding habitat was all spectacular. We settled into our rooms and received a brief orientation to our potential activities during the coming days, then we had our first of what would prove to be many delicious meals.



Mon., May 1 Little St. Simons Island (Myrtle Pond Tower and Norm's Pond)

Some of the group took the opportunity to ride bikes down to the LSSI Main Beach before breakfast. Such a delight to be on the beach early in the morning when the large flock of Royal Terns and miscellaneous shorebirds had not yet been disturbed.

After breakfast the LSSI naturalists took the lead in showing us some of the island's most spectacular spots. First, we went to a wooden tower overlooking Myrtle Pond. Here we were able to look out across extensive saltmarsh, giving us views of Mottled Ducks, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Least Bitterns and migrating Bobolinks. A big surprise was a brightly plumaged Cape May Warbler that flew into a scrubby tree just feet from where we all were standing; certainly not an expected bird, this individual was probably headed to its nesting grounds in the boreal forest of Canada.

Next, we returned to the lodge headquarters for a barbeque lunch. Then off to our afternoon activity, where a short drive in the LSSI pickup truck took us to Norm's Pond. Here a bird blind allowed us close looks and wonderful photographic opportunities of nesting Wood Storks, Great and Snowy Egrets, Common Gallinules and Roseate Spoonbills. We could probably have watched the behavior of these fabulous birds for hours as they established territories, built nests and fed young. Wow, what a show! And it was fun to watch Norm, too! "Norm" being a very large alligator who owns this pond, waiting to clean up the unavoidable accidents in a colony of breeding waterbirds where something happens, and a chick ends up falling from a nest into the water. We didn't witness any drama like that, but Norm was there, waiting, just in case.

Dinner back at the lodge -- what a day!

Tue., May 2 Little St. Simons Island (Main Beach)

Once again, some folks opted to start the day early with a bike ride to the beach. After breakfast, the LSSI naturalists showed us much of the saltmarsh channels surrounding LSSI from a shallow draft boat that allowed us to closely approach feeding herons and shorebirds. Clapper Rails were common here. We returned for lunch, then in the afternoon were driven down to the LSSI Main Beach where some of us had cycled in the morning. Most of the birds were the same as in the morning: Lesser Yellowlegs, Wilson's Plovers and Royal Terns, but



was so spectacular. Then it was time for dinner, preparations for our morning departure and a good visit with a very friendly armadillo wandering around the lodge headquarters. Our time on LSSI had gone by too quickly!

Tue., May 2 Little St. Simons Island, drive to Savannah

This day was quite different from our previous experiences. Aside from packing our luggage and loading onto the boat heading back to the mainland, we had a few odds and ends to attend to in the form of specific birds that people wanted to see. One of these was Orchard Oriole, and fortunately a nest-building pair located near the LSSI headquarters proved very cooperative. As our boat approached the mainland dock where we had left our van, an adult Bald Eagle soared overhead as if to say, "good-bye." Returning to Savannah, our focus was no longer on birds but, instead, on the cultural history of this celebrated city. We ate lunch at the Crystal Beer Parlor, one of the first American eating establishments to serve alcohol after the repeal of Prohibition. Then we checked into the historic Marshall House Hotel, one of Savannah's oldest hotels, built in 1851, and used as a Union hospital during the Civil War. Afterwards, we explored some of Savannah's 22 manicured parks and squares in the city's historic district, and finally had dinner at The Olde Pink House, serving classic southern cuisine in an elegant mansion built in 1789. What a great ending to a fabulous trip! The next morning, we said our goodbyes and headed off to our various new adventures, hoping to cross paths in the future.

Photos by Jon Atwood