

Georgia Coastal Birding | Trip Report October 1-8, 2021 | Written by Pat Lueders

With guide Pat Lueders and participants Barb, Carol, Gary, John, Melanie, Roberta, Tom, and Virginia.



Friday, October 1: Arrivals in Savannah | Ogeechee Canal Museum & Nature Center

Early arriving clients met at the Savannah Airport hotel to spend the afternoon on our first walk in a forest of live oak dripping with Spanish moss. The Ogeechee Canal Museum & Nature Center consists of bottomland hardwood forests as well as mixed pine hardwood forests, typical southern habitat we will spend many hours birding during the next week. White-eyed Vireos vocalized as did Carolina Wrens and Chickadees, Tufted Titmouse and Pileated Woodpeckers. The bald cypress and tupelo trees created a dense canopy above the wet forest floor. A Barred Owl vocalized at a distance, and Black-and-white Warblers, Downy Woodpeckers, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers moved amongst the Spanish moss. This would be a fitting introduction to birding in the Southern woods. The pond and trees behind our airport hotel were discovered to be a haven for roosting herons and egrets. Anhinga and Common Gallinule were found along the shore. The group quickly became acquainted at dinner, and all were anxious to begin our week of Georgia coastal birding!



Saturday, October 2: Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge | St. Simons Island

We left Savannah, driving to Harris Neck NWR, once a former Army Airfield. Acquired by the Nature Conservancy from 1980-2001, 2,824 acres is now the current size of the refuge. Our first stop was Woody Pond where we found Common Gallinules, Anhinga, Little Blue Heron, Great and Snowy Egret, Tricolored Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, White Ibis, and Wood Storks. What a fabulous beginning! We walked the Bunting Loop and found a mixed feeding flock of migrants that included White-eyed Vireos, American Redstarts, Black-and-white Warblers, a late Orchard Oriole, a Swainson's Thrush, and the beautiful Yellow-throated Warbler, a new species for many! At the refuge entrance, a delightfully shady spot for our picnic lunch was found under the live oaks. As we ate, to our delight, a Roseate Spoonbill was spotted flying into the nearby canal, another sought after species by the group. We hated to leave this fruitful spot! We arrived at our hotel on St. Simons Island, centrally located across the street from the St. Simon's Lighthouse, the museum, and the ocean. We took the short walk from our hotel to the gourmet seafood restaurant where we enjoyed a delicious dinner, discussing all the sightings of our first day in Georgia!

Sunday, October 3: St. Simons Island | Jekyll Island

After breakfast, we drove to Gould's Inlet, a sandbar on the Atlantic Ocean covered with shorebirds, gulls, pelicans, terns, and egrets. Where do we start? Scope views of Red Knots, Least & Pectoral Sandpipers, Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers; Caspian, Royal and Forester's Terns; Black Skimmers; Reddish, Great, and Snowy Egrets; and Laughing and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were enjoyed by all. Sanderlings ran along the shore and Willets fed in the shallow water. We hated to leave! We drove across the Jekyll Island causeway stopping for 20 perched Wood Storks low in the trees, more Roseate Spoonbills, and Osprey flying overhead. Black-necked Stilts fed in the ponds. Before lunch, we walked to the Amphitheater Pond finding a Green Heron, a Northern Parula, and additional American Redstarts. We enjoyed lunch on the wharf before boarding our private tour boat to bird the Intracoastal Waterway. Our first sighting was four manatees that emerged alongside our boat hoping for fresh water. The boat captain commented that they never have seen so many manatees at the same time, a memorable sighting! In Raccoon Key, we found a pier with eight Marbled Godwits resting with many



terns awaiting low the return of low tide. Large numbers of White Ibis flew low overhead returning to their roost. Barb alertly spotted an Atlantic dolphin as we returned to the dock. What a great way to spend an afternoon birding! Returning to our inn on St. Simons Island, we walked to another seafood restaurant for dinner, reminiscing about all the nature we had seen today.

Monday, October 4-Thursday October 7: The Lodge on Little St. Simons Island

We arrived at the dock to catch the ferry transporting us down Mosquito Creek for our three-day stay on Little St. Simons Island. Little St. Simons Island offers 7 miles of pristine beaches and 11,000 acres of undeveloped wilderness for exploration and birding. Privately owned and accessible only by boat, The Lodge on Little St. Simons Island offers accommodations for no more than 32 overnight guests. Many terns, gulls, herons, and egrets were seen during the short boat ride. We arrived at the dock and met in the living room of the quaint lodge for our introductions and orientation. After settling into our rooms and enjoying lunch, we traveled in the birding truck to our first blind finding Glossy Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, and Wood Storks. A visit to the beach gave us good looks at our first American Oystercatchers, Black-bellied Plovers, gulls, terns, and herons.

We were fortunate to have two unexpected boat tours of Mosquito Creek, one at low tide and one at high tide, because of the unexpected and intense mosquito outbreak on the island. On the low tide trip, we were thrilled to watch Clapper Rails on the mud flats oblivious to our presence, some even bathing in the channel, providing a great photo opportunity! Short-billed Dowitchers, Stilt Sandpipers, Willets, and Semipalmated Plovers fed in the open on the mud flats. A Loggerhead Shrike hunted from a dead tree as did Belted Kingfishers.



The next day, on the trip at high tide, we heard, and then got great looks, at a special species, the Seaside Sparrow. We saw at least eight different individuals as well as two subspecies of Marsh Wren, the dark Eastern species and the light, grayish brown Worthington's. In addition, Nate, our expert naturalist and boat captain, spotted some migrating Bobolinks, Common Yellowthroats, and a Yellow Warbler. What a delightful way to spend a lovely morning! Other trips to blinds in the island's marshes gave us great views of a group of 12 Common Gallinules, Blue-winged Teal and Mottled Ducks, Eastern Towhee, a Northern Waterthrush, and a Prairie Warbler. A real treat was prolonged looks at a male and female Painted Bunting busily feeding on seeds. A trip to the beautiful and expansive River Beach provided us with looks at endangered Piping Plovers, a Ruddy Turnstone, and Black-bellied Plovers, many still in breeding plumage. A fishing demonstration with nets by the naturalists produced a white shrimp, a live conch, and a Spade Fish. The island drives were beautiful, snaking through open marshes and live oak-lined roads. We were surprised to see so many Armadillos during the day feeding out in the open. Butterflies were plentiful especially in the lodge's fruit, vegetable, and flower garden. Many of the group swam in the large pool during our leisure time and shopped in the well-stocked gift store.

Thursday, October 7: Savannah

We returned to mainland Georgia this morning after an enjoyable and productive visit to the charming Little St. Simons Island. We drove to Savannah, arriving in time for a delicious lunch at the historical Crystal Beer Palace, and we walked to the nearby Forsyth Park and fountain. A tour of the historical Mercer/Williams House, constructed in 1860, was very interesting and informative. We checked into our hotel, enjoyed the happy hour, and walked to the Olde Pink House for our memorable farewell dinner. What a delightful end to our week of Georgia Coastal birding!

Friday, October 8: Departures

Some of the group extended their vacation in Savannah, others flew home today, and we sadly parted at the hotel or the airport after spending a week together forming bonds of friendship and memories!

Photo Credits: Group photo (Pat Lueders - PL), Little Blue Heron (PL), Juvenile American Alligator (PL), Rainbow (PL), St. Simon's Island (Virginia Smith - VS), Carolina wren (VS), Roseate Spoonbill (PL), Manatee (VS), Boat Tour (PL), Red-tailed Hawk (PL), Clapper Rail (VS), Belted Kingfisher (PL), Bobolink (PL), Forsyth Park Fountain, Group Dinner (PL), (PL)Armadillo (PL), Conch (PL).

