

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Savannah

Coastal Refuges



The chain of national wildlife refuges (NWR) comprising the Savannah Coastal Refuges complex extends from Pinckney Island NWR near Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, to Wolf Island NWR near Darien, Georgia. Between these lie Savannah (the largest unit in the complex), Wassaw, Tybee, Harris Neck, and Blackbeard Island refuges. Together they span a 100-mile stretch of coastline and total 54,077 acres. The Savannah Coastal Refuges are administered from headquarters located in Savannah, Georgia.



The Low-Country

Bordered on the west by sandhill ridges and on the east by the Atlantic Ocean, lies a band of low land extending from Georgetown, South Carolina, to St. Mary's, Georgia, known locally as the Low-Country. For over two centuries the diversity of fauna and flora within this region has attracted such naturalists as Alexander Wilson, Mark Catesby, John James Audubon, and William Bartram.



photo: Karen & John Hollingsworth©

Great egret

While the Carolina parakeets and ivory-billed woodpeckers which once inhabited the freshwater swamps within this coastal lowland have vanished, many rare and uncommon species remain. The southern bald eagle still soars majestically over the remnants of vast bottomlands such as those contained within the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge. Egrets and herons, once hunted nearly to extinction by the plume hunters of the early 1900's, continue to nest in rookeries such as those on Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge.

The variety of birdlife within the Low-Country is enhanced by its location on the Atlantic flyway. During the winter months, thousands of mallards, pintails, teal and as many as ten other species of ducks migrate into the area, joining resident wood ducks on the coastal refuges. In the spring and fall, transient songbirds and shorebirds stop briefly on their journey to and from northern nesting grounds.

Among these casual visitors are the diminutive warblers (magnolia, prairie, blackpoll...) and sandpipers (buff-breasted, white-rumped, pectoral...). Many migrant songbirds and shorebirds terminate their southern journey and spend the winter. The hermit thrush, ruby-crowned kinglet, yellow-rumped

*Cover photo:
Great blue heron
Gerald Tollison*

warbler, black-bellied plover, and sanderling, are a few of the winter residents.

In the heat of the humid summer months, the Low-Country's native flora ripens. The sweet magnolia blossoms, symbolic of the deep South, are abundant and lush beards of Spanish moss thicken with every rain. The live oak trees sport vibrant green manes of resurrection fern.

Visions of the Old South when rice was king in the Low-Country best comes to mind during these lazy summer months. The plantation homes may be gone, but the cultivated lands which made them possible live on. Though rice is no longer grown, the old fields have found new service as habitat for waterfowl and wading birds.



photo: USFWS

Nothing remains of Laurel Hill Plantation which once stood at the present main entrance to Savannah National Wildlife Refuge, but many of the dikes, originally built by slaves and itinerant Irishmen, and modernized rice field trunks (water control structures) continue to serve in management of the historic Low-Country's marshland.



Barrier Islands

Barrier islands are so named because they form a barrier between the ocean and the mainland. They are an integral part of a continuous chain of islands and beaches, stretching from Maine to Texas that protect the coast from hurricanes and storms.

Nowhere can there be found a more completely developed system of large barrier islands than on the Georgia Coast. The Spanish called them Guale, the Golden Isles.

Anyone who has spent time at the beach is at once aware of two major forces which affect barrier islands—wind and tides. The energy released by these natural elements is awesome indeed, and has battered our coastline unceasingly for thousands of years. To counter this force, nature has come up with a remarkable defense system—sand. Sand offers enough resistance to absorb and dissipate the tremendous energy of coastal storms and yet responds predictably to gentler wind and waves. Thus, man and his structures on the mainland are protected from the full violence of storms by the barrier islands.

Behind the barrier islands lie salt marshes, described by some as the

world's most productive acreage. Here nutrients from both fresh and salt water mix, providing organic material that moves into the sea to become a major link in the marine food chain. These marshes are also the nurseries for countless marine organisms, including shrimp, oysters, crabs, striped bass, and other commercial and sport species that are particularly important to the coastal economy. Without the protection afforded by the barrier islands, the tidal creeks and salt marshes would be no place for the delicate juvenile stages of so many species.



photo: Layne Hamilton

Such an abundance of life in the salt marsh invites other animals to rest, feed or nest. Located on the Atlantic Flyway, the islands are important to migrating waterfowl, especially those displaced from the rapidly disappearing marshes further up the Atlantic coast. The islands themselves provide ideal habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals, including endangered or

threatened species like the American alligator, peregrine falcon, wood stork, loggerhead sea turtle and southern bald eagle.

Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge

Pinckney Island NWR, established December 4, 1975, was once included in the plantation of Major General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, a prominent lawyer active in South Carolina politics from 1801 to 1815. Few traces of the island's plantation life in the 1800's exist today.

Habitat

The 4,053-acre refuge includes Pinckney Island, Corn Island, Big and Little Harry Islands, Buzzard Island and numerous small hammocks. Pinckney is the largest of the islands and the only one open to public use. Nearly 67% of the refuge consists of salt marsh and tidal creeks. A wide variety of land types are found on Pinckney Island alone: salt marsh, forestland, brushland, fallow field and freshwater ponds. In combination, these habitats support a diversity of bird and plant life.

Wildlife Observation/ Hiking/Bicycling

Studying, viewing and photographing the island's wildlife and scenery are popular activities throughout the year. Over fourteen miles of trails are open to hiking and bicycling. No motorized vehicles are allowed north of the public parking lot.

Hunting

When necessary for management purposes, a deer hunt is held on Pinckney Island (for hunt dates and regulations contact the Coastal Refuges' office).

Directions

The refuge entrance is located on U.S. 278, 18 miles east of Hardeeville, South Carolina, or .5 miles west of Hilton Head Island.

Savannah National Wildlife Refuge
Savannah NWR, established April 6, 1927, consists of 26,349 acres of freshwater marshes, tidal rivers and creeks and bottomland hardwoods.



Tupelo Trail

Management

The 3,000 acres of freshwater impoundments managed for migratory waterfowl were formerly the rice fields of plantations dating back to the mid or late 1700's. Many of the dikes enclosing these pools were originally built during the rice culture era.

Wildlife Observation

All dikes are open to foot travel during daylight hours, unless otherwise posted, and provide excellent wildlife observation points.

Habitat

About half the refuge is bottomland, composed primarily of cypress, gum and maple species. Access to this area is by boat only.

Waterfowl are most abundant from November through February, while alligators and other reptiles are common from March through October. Birdwatching opportunities are good all year but are best from October through April when temperatures are mild and many species of waterfowl and other wintering birds are present.

Auto Route, Hiking



Motorists are welcome on Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive, off S.C. 170, which meanders along four miles of earthen dikes through managed freshwater pools and hardwood hammocks. Cistern Trail and other walking routes are also available to the visiting public. From December 1 to March 15, entry into the impoundment area north of U.S. 17 is prohibited to reduce disturbance while wintering waterfowl numbers are at a peak.

Fishing, Hunting

Fishing is permitted in the freshwater pools from March 15 to October 25 and is governed by South Carolina and refuge regulations. The refuge administers deer, feral hog, squirrel, and turkey hunts during the fall and winter. Permits to hunt on the refuge must be obtained from the Coastal office in Savannah.

Directions

Savannah NWR is located on SC-170, six miles south of Hardeeville, South Carolina via US-17 (Exit 5 off I-95); or one mile north of Port Wentworth, Georgia on GA-25/SC-170 (take I-95 Exit 19 to GA-21 South, then east on GA-30 to GA-25 North.)



photo: David E. Goeke

Tybee National Wildlife Refuge

Tybee NWR was established on May 9, 1938 as a breeding area for migratory birds and other wildlife. The majority of the 100 acre-refuge is covered with sand deposits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' dredging activities in the Savannah River. The more stable portions of the island are densely covered with such woody species as eastern red cedar, wax myrtle, and groundsel. Saltwater marsh borders parts of the island. At low tide the shoreline provides a resting and feeding place for many species of migratory birds.

The refuge is located in the mouth of the Savannah River directly opposite Fort Pulaski National Monument which is 12 miles from Savannah on U.S. 80. **Tybee NWR is closed to public use.**



Nesting osprey

Hunting, Fishing

Access

Wassaw National Wildlife Refuge

Wassaw, one of Georgia's coastal barrier islands, was designated a National Wildlife Refuge on October 20, 1969. Unlike many of Georgia's Golden Isles, little development and few management practices have modified Wassaw's primitive character. The 10,070-acre refuge includes beaches with rolling dunes, live oak and slash pine woodlands, and vast salt marshes.

Refuge visitors may enjoy recreational activities such as birdwatching, beachcombing, hiking and general nature studies. The 20 miles of dirt roads on Wassaw Island and seven miles of beach provide an ideal wildlife trail system for hikers. Birdwatching is particularly fruitful during the spring and fall migrations.

The island supports rookeries for egrets and herons, and a variety of wading birds are abundant in the summer months. In summer, telltale tracks on Wassaw's beach attest to nocturnal visits by the threatened loggerhead sea turtles which come ashore for egg laying and then return secretively to the sea.

Deer hunts (both bow and gun) are scheduled in the fall and winter. The Coastal Refuges' office can provide a schedule of hunt dates and issue hunt regulations. The saltwaters of the refuge marshland are open to fishing throughout the year.

Wassaw NWR is accessible only by boat. Both Wassaw and Pine Island are open to the public during daylight hours—**other upland areas are closed**. Transportation to the refuge must be arranged by the visitor. Several local marinas in the Savannah area (at Skidaway Island and Isle of Hope) and a public boat ramp adjacent to the Skidaway Island bridge can serve as launching sites for trips to Wassaw.

Habitat

Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge

Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1962 by transfer of federal lands formerly managed by the Federal Aviation Administration as a WWII Army airfield. The refuge's 2,762 acres consist of saltwater marsh, grassland, mixed deciduous woods and cropland. Because of this great variety in habitat, many different species of birds are attracted to the refuge throughout the year.

Wildlife Observation

In the summer, thousands of egrets and herons nest in the swamps, while in the winter large concentrations of ducks (especially mallards, gadwall and teal) gather in the marshland and freshwater pools. Over 15 miles of paved roads and trails provide the visitor easy access to these areas. Some portions of the refuge may be closed seasonally to protect wildlife from human disturbance.



photo: Jim Barber

Wood storks with downy young

Fishing, Boating

Fishing is allowed in the tidal creeks bordering the refuge. Piers have been constructed for public use on Harris Neck Creek at the Georgia Route 131 entrance. Access to refuge tidal waters and Blackbeard Island can be gained from a public boat ramp located on the Barbour River (at the termination of Georgia Route 131). The Barbour River Landing is open daily from 4:00 am to midnight, or as posted.

Hunting

Deer hunts are managed on the refuge in the fall and winter. Hunters may obtain a schedule of hunt dates and hunt regulations from the Coastal Office.

Directions

To reach Harris Neck, take Exit 12 off I-95 and travel south on U.S. 17 for approximately one mile, then east on Harris Neck Road for seven miles to the main entrance gate.

Habitat

Blackbeard Island National Wildlife Refuge

Blackbeard Island was acquired by the Navy Department at public auction in 1800 as a source of live oak timber for ship building. A Presidential Proclamation in 1940 changed its designation from Blackbeard Island Reservation to Blackbeard Island National Wildlife Refuge. Today, the refuge's 5,618 acres include maritime forest, salt marsh, freshwater marsh, and beach habitat. In 1975, three thousand acres of the refuge were set aside as National Wilderness.

Wildlife Observation, Hiking, Fishing, Hunting

Blackbeard Island offers a variety of recreational activities year-round. Wildlife observation, especially birdwatching, is excellent throughout the year. In winter months, waterfowl utilize the marshland and man-made freshwater pools, while songbirds abound in the wooded acres in the spring and fall. The existing trails and roads provide hikers with scenic paths ideal for nature study. Saltwater creeks which pass through refuge marshland are open to fishing the entire year. Presently, two archery hunts for deer are scheduled on the island in the fall and winter (for exact dates and hunt regulations contact the Coastal Refuges' headquarters).



photo: Tommy King

Access

Blackbeard Island is accessible only by boat. Transportation to the island is not provided by the Fish and

Wildlife Service. Arrangements for trips to the refuge can be made at Shellman's Bluff. To reach Shellman's Bluff, travel south from Savannah on U.S. 17 for approximately 51 miles to Shellman Bluff Road which terminates at Shellman Bluff on the Julienton River. A public boat ramp on Harris Neck NWR (Barbour River Landing) may also be used as a launching site for trips to the island.



photo: David E. Goeke

*Blackbeard Island
archery hunter*

Wolf Island National Wildlife Refuge

Wolf Island NWR, which includes Egg Island and Little Egg Island, was established on April 3, 1930. The refuge consists of a long narrow strip of oceanfront beach backed by a broad band of salt marsh. Over 75% of the refuge's 5,125 acres are composed of saltwater marshes.

Wolf Island NWR was designated a National Wilderness in 1975, therefore no public use facilities are planned on the refuge. Though the refuge's saltwaters are open to a variety of recreational activities, **all beach, marsh, and upland areas are closed to the public.** Visitors must make their own arrangements to reach the refuge. Marinas in the Darien, Georgia area may offer transportation to Wolf Island NWR.



Regulations

Questions regarding specific regulations for individual refuges should be directed to the Coastal office. Here, in brief, are some general regulations:



Defacement, damage, or removal of any government structure, sign, or marker is prohibited.



Feeding, capturing or hunting wildlife is strictly prohibited unless otherwise authorized.



All of the refuge's historical, archaeological, and natural resources are protected. Artifact hunting is not allowed. Do not pick flowers or remove vegetation.



Dogs, cats and other pets are not permitted.



For further information

Call the Savannah Coastal Refuges office during business hours (Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 4:30 pm; closed on federal holidays): 912/652 4415.



Visit the Savannah Coastal Refuges office located in the Parkway Business Center on Chatham Parkway. To reach the office, take Exit 33-a (Chatham Parkway) off I-16 East to Savannah, Georgia; drive one mile south on Chatham Parkway to the Parkway Business Center. The refuge headquarters occupy Suite 10.

Write to:

Savannah Coastal Refuges
Parkway Business Center, Suite 10,
1000 Business Center Drive
Savannah, Georgia 31405



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