

South Carolina Birding Hotspots

February 7-11, 2024

Itinerary:

Day 1 (Wed, Feb 7) – Arrival in Charleston

You may arrive anytime today in Charleston, SC. For those driving in, please proceed to our hotel, where a room will be reserved in your name. For those flying in, we will pick you up at the airport and drive you to our hotel. After checking in, we plan on meeting in the hotel lobby for a brief orientation at 6 PM before heading to dinner. ***Night in Mt. Pleasant.***

Day 2 (Thursday, February 8) - Huntington Beach State Park

After an early breakfast, we'll be heading to Huntington Beach State Park to explore a wide variety of habitats. Depending on the tide and other conditions, we will either take the walk to the north jetties first or explore the wetlands and forest in the main portion of the park. This is mostly driving and short walks. There will be a wide variety of waterbirds and waterfowl in Mullet Pond to the south and potentially shorebirds and wading birds in the open marsh to the north. We will see both diving and puddle ducks here and some marsh birds. Walking over to the Atalaya Trail we will be in maritime forest and have wetlands on both sides of the trail, where could have possibly a King Rail. Kinglets, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and other passerines are found in the forest here. Most recently Townsend's Warbler and Townsend's Solitaire visited here, and this is a good place to look for rarities. We'll then move on the north beach where we will have a picnic lunch and then walk to the north jetties, explore the ocean, beach, and inlet, then loop back through the grassland trail (2.5 mile walk). We will take our time looking for Northern Gannet, Common Loon, Red-Throated Loon, Canvasback, all three species of scoters, Purple Sandpiper, Horned Grebes, Red Knots, and hopefully a Parasitic Jaeger. We'll look for Saltmarsh Sparrow in the salt marsh next to the jetty, before working our way back through the grassland which should have Savannah Sparrows and American Kestrel, and if we are lucky, pipits and longspurs which have been seen in the area in the past.

Huntington Beach State Park is the #1 eBird hotspot in the state (338 species) and this is where many of the state's rarities are found. Notable rare birds seen here in past winters are Snow Bunting, Lapland and Smith's Longspur, American and Sprague's Pipit, Cave Swallow, Short-eared Owl, Long-eared Owl, Great Cormorant, Dovekie, Common and Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Razorbill, and Pacific Loon. We'll also scan for some of the rarer sea ducks: Common Eider, Harlequin, and Long-tailed Duck. We'll either eat dinner in the Murrel's Inlet area or drive back to Mount Pleasant for dinner. ***Night in Mt. Pleasant.***

Day 3 (Friday, February 9) - Santee Coastal Reserve Wildlife Management Area

We'll start the day with breakfast and drive to the Santee Coastal Reserve Wildlife Management Area (WMA) (287 eBird species) near McClellanville, SC. This wildlife management area is 24,000 acres and we'll only have time to explore a small portion of it, even with a full day planned here. We'll begin at the entrance in the longleaf pine forest and search for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, which are fairly common here. We'll also search for Bachman's Sparrow; most are gone this time of the year, but a few birds linger through the winter. Northern Bobwhite is found in the piney woods, and we should expect most other

pine forest birds here; Pine Warbler, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Eastern Bluebird. This is the area where we may find eight species of woodpecker. Some winters have held Pine Siskin, Purple Finch, and Brown Creeper in the hardwood areas interspersed throughout the area. We'll move on to the live oak avenue where we'll look for Red-headed Woodpeckers and wintering songbirds, then move on to the boat ramp overlooking the South Santee River and the Big Well impoundments on the property. Here we hope to find shorebirds and wading birds if water levels are appropriate, and rarities such as Hudsonian Godwit, Wilson's Phalarope, and Cinnamon Teal have been here in the past. Barn Owls use the nest boxes here so we'll look for owls roosting during the day. Next, we'll make a short drive over to the Cape Trail Parking area where we will walk out to the vast managed wetland complex on the property. This will be another approximately 2.5-mile hike, and we will traverse maritime forests and wetland before we arrive at the open expanse of the impoundments. Here we expect to see large numbers of waterfowl, and this is an area that typically holds a Eurasian Wigeon in the winter. Snow Goose, American White Pelicans, American Bitterns, Roseate Spoonbills should all be here, as well as most of South Carolina's wading birds (herons and egrets). If the water has been drawn down in the impoundments there should be a lot of shorebirds to sort through. This is a good place for Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, and raptors are often abundant over the Santee Delta. We'll then make our way back to the vehicles and perhaps have dinner in McClellanville or drive back to the Mount Pleasant area for dinner. ***Night in Mt. Pleasant.***

Day 4 (Saturday, February 10) - Bear Island and Donnelley Wildlife Management Areas

We'll have breakfast and make the drive to Bear and Donnelley WMAs, located in the heart of the ACE Basin - a large conservation initiative with private landowners driving the conservation in the area. Our first stop is at Fisherman's Canal, which is often loaded with wading birds, waterfowl, and marsh birds and well worth the visit if water levels are appropriate. Continuing on to Bear Island, we visit Mary's Pond, a great place for Tundra Swans and American White Pelicans, waterfowl and shorebirds. We'll continue on TiTi Rd. and visit the most reliable place for Black Rail in the lowcountry. Black Rails are here this time of year, and we'll certainly try to hear one! Back along the main road, we will visit a number of impoundments, some of which require short hikes. We should see large numbers and diversity of waterfowl and wading birds, marsh birds, and shorebirds. Mottled Ducks are common, and we hope to see American Black Ducks. If the tour road is open, we'll drive this road for Glossy Ibis, Roseate Spoonbills, and Black-crowned Night-Herons. Great Kiskadee and White-tailed Kite have been seen here in the past, so big time rarities do occur. Before finishing at Bear, we'll check the owl boxes for Barn and Eastern Screech Owls.

Next, we drive to Donnelley WMA (268 eBird species) and enter on Blocker Run Road. We'll be immediately in Red-cockaded Woodpecker habitat, and the woodpeckers were recently established here through proper habitat management, construction of artificial cavities, and translocating of birds. We'll move on to the fields and hopefully find Vesper Sparrows, Horned Larks and Eastern Meadowlarks, and other open field species. We'll always be on the lookout for a Golden Eagle, seen at both Bear and Donnelly in recent years. Next, we'll visit the Savage Backwater looking for marsh birds and Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, then move on to Lodge and Fishburne Ponds where we expect fairly large numbers of waterfowl, Roseate Spoonbills, American White Pelicans, shorebirds, and a wide variety of raptors. There has been Eurasian Wigeon here in the past winters. After birding these wetlands, we'll make our way to the main entrance and exit, but birding along the way at various impounded wetlands. Rarities in the past have been Common Goldeneye, Ruff, and American Golden Plover. Wood Ducks are abundant here, and Sedge Wrens and Rusty Blackbirds are also present. Sixteen species of sparrow have been reported in

Donnelley, most of them wintering species. We'll head back to the Charleston area and have dinner on the way or near the hotel. ***Night in Mt. Pleasant.***

Day 5 (Sunday, February 11) - East Kiawah Beach (or other nearby hotspots)

After breakfast, we make our way to Kiawah Island. We'll possibly stop at Mingo Point and the Kiawah Island Parkway before entering the private section of the island. If the tide is right, this is a good place for the marsh sparrows, particularly Saltmarsh Sparrows, and often birds leaving their night roosts are flying up or down river. Once we get inside the private section, we'll proceed directly to the Ocean Course Clubhouse and walk to the beach area of Kiawah Island East Beach (221 eBird species in this small area!). The golf course here was designed by Pete Dye and is one of the most prestigious courses to play in the country. We'll walk behind the driving range, by the Rolex Watch Tower, chat with the friendly caddies, and move on to the tidal pool. This tidal pool holds hundreds if not thousands of birds at certain times, including diving ducks, terns, gulls, and shorebirds. Waterfowl will be in the tidal pool and the ocean, along with Common and Red-throated Loons. Northern Gannets will be offshore, and we should see scoters on the ocean. The main attraction here is the Bar-tailed Godwit, which has been present since October of 2021 with the exception of a few spring and summer months but has remained here the past two winters! This is South Carolina's first record for this species, and we can expect to see up to 15 additional species of shorebirds while looking for this one in the tidal pool. At one time, there were three godwits present here: Bar-tailed, Hudsonian, and Marbled. This is a short walk, and the birds are concentrated in one area so we can view most everything with little walking except to get to the beach area.

After our morning at Kiawah, the tour ends, wrapping up just before lunchtime. Return flights should be planned for 2 PM or later.

****Order of days in itinerary may change if logistically necessary***