

# Tybee

## National Wildlife Refuge



photo: Robert Chauri



photo: Jonas Jordan



photo: Shaw Davis



photo: USFWS

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Tybee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is located in Jasper County, South Carolina, at the mouth of the Savannah River, adjacent to the Georgia state line. The refuge lies across the river from the small Georgia town of Tybee Island (population 2,700). Salt marsh and hammocks separate the refuge from the mainland.

Tybee NWR is part of the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex which is headquartered in Savannah, Georgia. The complex includes seven national wildlife refuges, totaling 56,949 acres, found along a 100-mile stretch of coastline in Georgia and South Carolina. The seven refuges are Pinckney Island and Tybee NWRs in South Carolina; Savannah (located in both states along the Savannah River); and Wassaw, Harris Neck, Blackbeard Island, and Wolf Island NWRs in Georgia.

### Refuge Facts

- Created under an executive order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt dated May 9, 1938, as a breeding area for migratory birds and other wildlife.
- The 100-acre refuge began as a one-acre oyster shoal, Oysterbed Island, used by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a spoil disposal site to support their mandated harbor dredging activity.
- The enabling legislation provided the U.S. Coast Guard control over a one-acre site known as Oyster Bed Lighthouse Reservation, and the COE retained spoil deposition rights. The USCG tract was transferred to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on February 17, 1960.
- Accretions to Oysterbed Island, resulting from COE river and harbor improvements, continue to expand Tybee NWR's acreage.

- Oysterbed Island was the site of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century quarantine station for the City of Savannah and a residence for custom house officials.
- The Oyster Bed Light, a brick day beacon tower, was in ruin by 1935 and no longer stands.

### Natural History

- The refuge is an important resting and feeding area for migratory birds including gulls, terns, neo-tropical migratory songbirds and shorebirds.
- When sufficient quantities of sand are deposited on the refuge following Savannah River dredging activity, least terns form nesting colonies.
- Endangered species, including piping plovers and wood storks, have been observed on the refuge land, while shortnose sturgeon and manatees have been found in the waters bordering Tybee NWR.

### Financial Impact of Refuge

- Managed from Savannah NWR field office in Jasper County, SC.
- Public use figures are not compiled as the refuge is closed to the public.
- Tybee NWR is part of a seven-refuge complex that has an annual budget of \$3,434,000 (FY06) and a combined staff of 29, none assigned specifically to this refuge.

### Refuge Objectives

- Tybee was established by executive order to "effectuate further the purposes of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act." The refuge is primarily managed for the benefit of nesting shorebirds.

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- Stated objectives of the refuge only dictate basic ownership and protection. Due to its small size, limited habitat, and inadequate funding, Tybee NWR is closed to the public.

## Management Tools

- Environmental education/interpretation.
- Law enforcement.

## Public Use Opportunities

- Closed to the public.
- Wildlife observation/photography by boat only.
- Research opportunities by permit.

## Questions and Answers

*Why is the refuge closed to the public?*

The refuge's small size provides minimal habitat for wildlife, however, numerous species of birds utilize the available shoreline, tidal saltwater marsh, open spoil banks, and shrubby uplands. Visitor use is not compatible with the nesting, feeding and resting activity of the refuge birdlife since disturbance is a factor in such a limited area.

No boat docking facilities or other amenities are located on the refuge. Though much of Tybee NWR's birdlife could easily be viewed by boat from the Savannah River, the public is not encouraged to attempt such viewing. Heavy traffic in the Savannah River, combined with treacherous currents, make navigation to the refuge hazardous.

*What kind of wildlife is found on Tybee NWR?*

Least terns, black skimmers, Wilson's plovers, and several other shorebird species have nested on the spoil deposits on Tybee NWR during the spring and summer. During all seasons, the refuge's shoreline and open spoil deposits are used as resting sites for brown pelicans, gulls, terns, and many other species. With the use of telescopes, many birdwatchers do observe the refuge birdlife from levees located across the river with Fort Pulaski National Monument.

*What are the refuge's most common plants?*

Sandy portions of the island are covered with only sparse vegetation. The more stable portions of the island are vegetated with such woody species as eastern red cedar, wax myrtle, salt cedar, and groundsel bush. The marsh areas surrounding the island are dominated by salt marsh cordgrass.