

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Savannah

*Coastal Refuges  
Complex*



*The chain of national wildlife refuges (NWR) that forms 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 56,949 acres. The Savannah Coastal Refuges are administered from headquarters located on Savannah NWR.*



*This blue goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.*

## **The Lowcountry**

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 Lowcountry. 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.



*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 Lowcountry 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 journeys 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 journeys 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 Lowcountry'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 Lowcountry best come 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.



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 Lowcountry'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 developed a remarkable defense system—sand. Sand offers enough resistance to absorb and dissipate the tremendous energy of coastal storms. 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, supporting growth

of 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.

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 such as the piping plover, wood stork, loggerhead sea turtle.



Layne Hamilton

### **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 after the American Revolution. 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 is 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 Savannah NWR Visitor Center).

*Directions* The refuge entrance is located on U.S. 278, 18 miles east of Hardeeville, South Carolina, or 0.5 miles west of Hilton Head Island.

**Savannah National Wildlife Refuge**  
Savannah NWR, established April 6, 1927, consists of 29,175 acres of freshwater marshes, tidal rivers and creeks, and bottomland hardwoods.

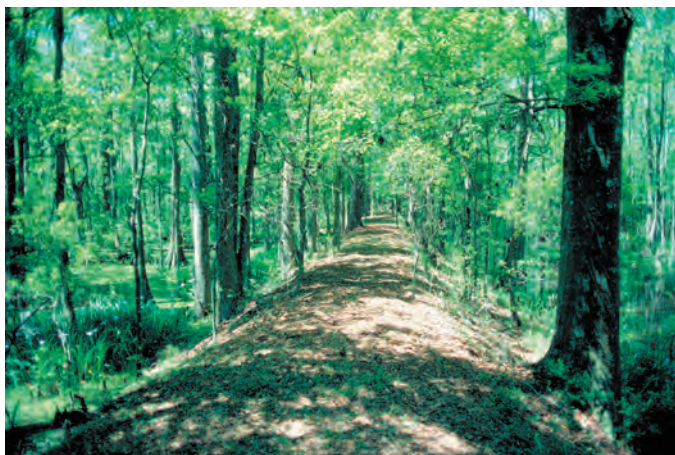
*Management* The 3,000 acres of freshwater impoundments managed for migratory waterfowl were formerly the rice fields of plantations dating back to the mid or late 1700's. Many of the dikes enclosing these pools were originally built during the rice culture era.

*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.

David E. Goeke



## *Tupelo Trail*

Waterfowl are most abundant from November through February, while alligators and other reptiles are frequently seen 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*

USFWS



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 through February, entry into portions of the impoundment area north of S.C. 170 is prohibited to reduce disturbance while wintering waterfowl numbers are at a peak.



## *Fishing, Hunting*

Fishing is permitted in the freshwater pools from March 1 to November 30 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 Savannah NWR Visitor Center.

## *Directions*

The Savannah NWR Visitor Center is located on US-17, six miles south of Hardeeville, South Carolina (Exit 5 off I-95), or six miles north of the city of Savannah, Georgia.

### **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'



*David E. Goeke*

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.**



## **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 10,053-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 several species 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 that come ashore for egg laying and then return to the sea.

### *Hunting, Fishing*

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

## Access

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 2,824 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



USFWS

Wood stork chicks

portions of the refuge may be closed seasonally to protect wildlife from human disturbance.

## 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 refuge 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 Harris Neck Road). 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 Savannah NWR Visitor Center.

### *Directions*

To reach Harris Neck, take Exit 67 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.



Tommy King

### *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



*Blackbeard Island  
archery hunter*

paths ideal for nature study. Saltwater creeks that 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 Savannah NWR Visitor Center).

### *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 Bluff. To reach Shellman Bluff, travel south from Savannah on U.S. 17 for approximately 51 miles to Shellman Bluff Road which terminates at Shellman Bluff on the Julinton 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.

### **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 5,126 acres are saltwater marsh.

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 Savannah NWR Visitor Center. 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 specifically 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.

Shell collectors are asked to take no live shells and to limit their collection to a handful or so.

Dogs, cats, and other pets are not permitted.

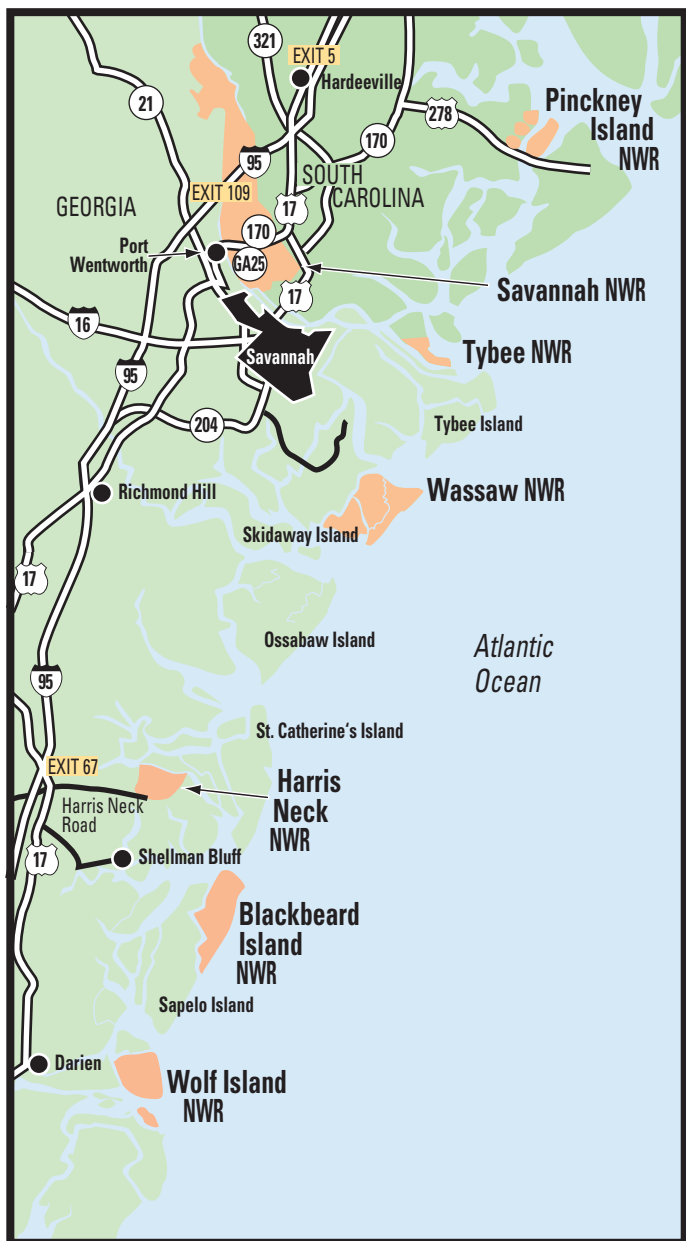
### For further information

Call the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center during business hours (Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 4:30 pm; closed on federal holidays: 843/784 2468).

Write to:  
Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex  
694 Beech Hill Lane  
Hardeeville, SC 29927

E-mail: [savannahcoastal@fws.gov](mailto:savannahcoastal@fws.gov)  
Website: <http://www.fws.gov/savannah>

<http://www.fws.gov/blackbeardisland>  
<http://www.fws.gov/harrisneck>  
<http://www.fws.gov/pinckneyisland>  
<http://www.fws.gov/savannah>  
<http://www.fws.gov/tybee>  
<http://www.fws.gov/wassaw>  
<http://www.fws.gov/wolfisland>



Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs and activities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is available to all individuals regardless of physical or mental disability. For more information please contact the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office for Equal Opportunity, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20240

Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex  
694 Beech Hill Lane  
Hardeeville, SC 29927  
843/784 2468  
savannahcoastal@fws.gov

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
1 800/344 WILD  
<http://www.fws.gov/savannah>

March 2009

