

## Hidden treasures: The South Carolina Lowcountry

Waters run wide and shallow, wading birds lift off in silent flight, the sun sets over marshes as far as the eye can see and the moon rises over forests alive with the sounds of myriad creatures. Waves break over uninhabited shores and islanders commute by boat, rather than multi-lane highways.

Things that sound too good to be true usually are, so the saying goes. But in the Lowcountry of South Carolina, thanks in large part to former Northern landowners, there exists a remarkable combination of conservation, preservation and wise management of natural resources - life is good. Radiating out from Georgetown - a historic port city located about halfway between Myrtle Beach and Charleston - are thousands upon thousands of acres of protected marshes, estuarine creeks and rivers, inlets and maritime forests.

Years ago, wealthy businessmen and their families came to the coastal lands of South Carolina to get away from the rush and stress of big cities and demanding jobs. They came here to relax and to hunt for native deer, turkey and waterfowl, all of which were plentiful. Because of their love of the land, much of their property was willed to various local, state and federal agencies to be used, in perpetuity, as wildlife conservation sites.

Piloting a boat out from the marina at The Belle Isle Yacht Club, home of Battery White, a Civil War S.C. Heritage Trust site just south of Georgetown, one enters Winyah Bay. This bay, a salt wedge estuary, lies at the heart of the third largest estuarine watershed (about 18,000 square miles) on the eastern seaboard. On the northeast side of the bay lies the North Inlet-Winyah Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, a state and federally protected site encompassing over 12,300 acres of abandoned rice fields, oyster reefs, tidal wetlands, creeks and beaches. The Reserve overlaps Hobcaw Barony's 17,500-acre wildlife habitat. The University of South Carolina and Clemson University both have facilities, located on the property, which are committed to research and conservation of coastal forests, wetlands, and waterways.

On the southwest side of the bay is the Tom Yawkey Wildlife Center, covering about 20,000 acres. Comprised of North and South islands and most of Cat Island, it contains marshes, longleaf pine and maritime forests, beaches and wetlands and is dedicated as a wildlife preserve and waterfowl refuge.

Moving south from the Yawkey preserve, one crosses the North and South Santee rivers and enters into the Santee Coastal Reserve and then on down to Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge. These two areas offer up more than 350,000 acres of wilderness - more marshes, maritime forests, wetlands and the longest span of undeveloped beaches and barrier islands in the United States.

As amazing as this all is, there's more. Traveling up Winyah Bay and into the Waccamaw and Pee Dee rivers one heads into the Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge, created in 1997 and currently encompassing over 6,000 acres. Lying between the Great Pee Dee and Waccamaw rivers is Sandy Island. This

9,000-plus acre island is home to wetlands, longleaf pine forests, and is inhabited by a small community of longtime residents – descendants of former slaves. The island is accessible only by boat.

Driving north of Georgetown along U.S. Highway 17, one encounters the enchanting Brookgreen Gardens, an extensive outdoor sculpture garden and park. Just across the highway is Huntington Beach State Park. Also in the area are former plantations, a bike path, and historic fishing villages. Local festivals celebrate African American culture, the fishing and shrimping industries, and the heritage of hunting and fishing on Winyah Bay.

All of these wildlife refuges, conservation areas and parks are open to the public, some with limited access. Together they are home to hundreds of species of songbirds, waterfowl, raptors, mammals, fish and plants, including several endangered and protected species such as the loggerhead sea turtle, the red-cockaded woodpecker, wood storks and bottlenose dolphins.

Come visit the Lowcountry and uncover our hidden natural treasures. Dip your oars in the blackwater rivers. Walk quietly along the forest trails. Eat a picnic lunch on an empty beach. Observe wildlife living as they have for centuries. Leave the hustle and bustle, the traffic jams and the sweltering shimmer of blacktop roads. Rest your spirit and abide a while. The wildlife refuges of the Lowcountry beckon.

For more information:

The Belle Isle Yacht Club and Marina: [www.theyachtclubatbelleisle.com](http://www.theyachtclubatbelleisle.com)

Brookgreen Gardens: [www.brookgreen.org](http://www.brookgreen.org)

Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge: [www.fws.gov/caperomain/](http://www.fws.gov/caperomain/)

Hobcaw Barony: [www.hobcawbarony.org](http://www.hobcawbarony.org)

Huntington Beach State Park: [www.huntingtonbeachsc.org/](http://www.huntingtonbeachsc.org/)

North Inlet – Winyah Bay National Estuary Research Reserve:

[www.northinlet.sc.edu](http://www.northinlet.sc.edu)

The Tom Yawkey Wildlife Preserve: [www.yawkeyfoundations.org](http://www.yawkeyfoundations.org)

Waccamaw National Wildlife Refuge: [www.fws.gov/waccamaw/](http://www.fws.gov/waccamaw/)

Sandy Island Preserve: [www.nature.org/wherework/northamerica/states/southcarolina/preserves/art1635.html](http://www.nature.org/wherework/northamerica/states/southcarolina/preserves/art1635.html)

Santee Coastal Reserve: <http://southern.ducks.org/CapeUnit.php>

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