

Birding South Carolina

A Guide to 40 Premier Birding Sites

Jeff Mollenhauer

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1 Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

Habitats: Pond, river, salt marsh, freshwater marsh, mudflats, mixed pine-hardwood forest.

Specialty birds: *Resident*—Anhinga, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Glossy and White Ibises, Bald Eagle, Red-shouldered Hawk, Clapper and King Rails, Barn Owl, Yellow-throated Warbler. *Summer*—Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Least Bittern, Wood

Stork, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Purple Gallinule, Black-necked Stilt, Least Tern, Common Nighthawk, Summer Tanager, Indigo and Painted Buntings. *Winter*—American Bittern, Canvasback, Sora, Virginia Rail, Sedge Wren, Black-and-white Warbler, Rusty Blackbird. *Migration*—Bobolink.

Best times to bird: Year-round.

Directions: From exit 5 on Interstate 95 in Hardeeville, follow U.S. Highway 17 south toward Savannah, Georgia. After 6.2 miles Highway 170 will split off to the right. Follow Highway 170 for 2.6 miles to the entrance for Savannah NWR on your left.

The Birding

Savannah National Wildlife Refuge is well known as the best place in South Carolina to find breeding Purple Gallinules. In winter the impoundments on the refuge can be loaded with waterfowl. The most commonly seen ducks are Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teals, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, and Ruddy Duck. Also possible, but not to be expected, are Tundra Swan; Greater White-fronted, Snow, and Ross's Geese; Mottled Duck; Redhead; and Common Goldeneye. The refuge is also full of American Coots in winter and Common Moorhens throughout the year. Numerous wading birds feed in the refuge's many impoundments, including Wood Stork, Glossy and White Ibises, and Tricolored and Little Blue Herons. King Rail can be found in many freshwater impoundments, but beware of misidentification with the more numerous Clapper Rail.

The most accessible part of the refuge is the 5-mile-long **Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive**. There is a kiosk at the entrance with a map and information about bird-watching. Head down the wildlife drive and stop after 0.2 mile at the wooden rice trunk gates, then look into the canal on the right for Clapper Rail year-round and Least Bittern in summer. After another 0.2 mile you will see a small lily pad-covered canal on the left. Stop here in summer and look for Purple Gallinule as well as Least Bittern and Least Tern. The refuge's Purple Gallinules prefer the impoundments and canals that are covered in lily pads. During winter, scan the grassy edges of the canal for American Bittern, Sora, Virginia Rail, and Sedge Wren.

Continue 0.7 mile to the **Cistern Nature Trail**. The short, 0.2-mile trail is a good example of a hammock, which is an island of upland forest surrounded by marsh. This hammock and others along the wildlife drive are good spots to



Lily pad-covered impoundment along Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive

find large flocks of songbirds during migration and in winter. In winter look for White-eyed Vireo, Gray Catbird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Yellow-throated and Black-and-white Warblers. During summer look for Painted Bunting along the edges of the hammocks. You can often find Northern Waterthrush along the trail during spring and fall. Continue along the wildlife drive, and after 0.4 mile you will start to see flooded agricultural fields on either side of the road. The flooded fields can be good for large rafts of Ring-necked Ducks in the winter, but be sure to search through them carefully for Canvasbacks.

After 0.8 mile you will see a large lily pad-covered impoundment on the left. The impoundment is the best area along the wildlife drive to find Purple Gallinule in summer. If you visit the refuge in June or July, be on the lookout for small black chicks following the adults along the lily pads, begging for food. The large numbers of Common Moorhen that breed on the refuge can make distant identification of the Purple Gallinule difficult at times. The gallinules often appear fast and thin compared to the slow, fat moorhens.

Also be sure to keep an eye out for Least Bittern and Black-bellied Whistling-Duck during summer. In the winter look for rafts of ducks hiding among the lily pads. At dawn and dusk Common Nighthawks are active over many of the impoundments during the summer, and the lucky observer may catch a glimpse of Barn Owls, which are occasionally seen on the refuge throughout the year.

When you reach Highway 170, you will notice a small dirt parking area on the opposite (north) side of road. From the parking lot, you can hike along dikes

through the rice fields in the northern portion of Savannah NWR. There are more than 4 miles of dikes that you can hike during the spring and summer. You will find the same types of birds that are found along Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive, but since the north side is closed to vehicles, it often has significantly less people-traffic. Please note, however, that the entire northern section of the refuge is closed from December 1 to February 28. To search for waterfowl, use the pull-outs along Highway 170 that provide good views of the area.

General Information

Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive is open year-round from sunrise to sunset, but the other parts of the refuge are closed from December 1 to February 28 to protect waterfowl.

DeLorme atlas: Page 62, D3.

Elevation: 0 to 10 feet.

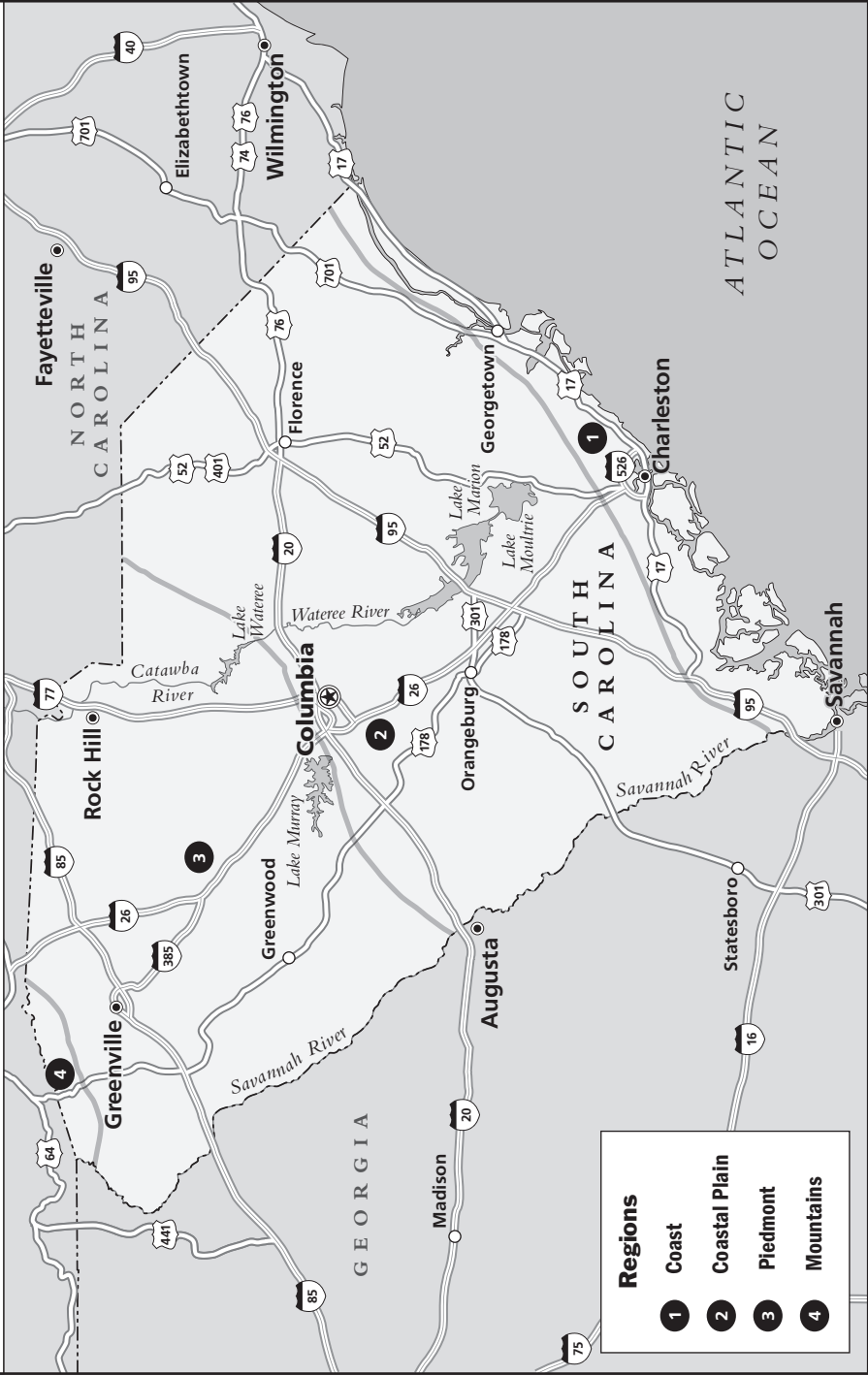
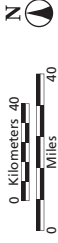
Hazards: Alligators, venomous snakes, mosquitoes, ticks.

Nearest food, gas, lodging: Hardeeville.

Camping: Skidaway Island State Park.

For more information: Savannah NWR.

Overview



Regions

- 1 Coast
- 2 Coastal Plain
- 3 Piedmont
- 4 Mountains

Habitats: Salt marsh, freshwater marsh, mixed pine-hardwood forest, beach, mudflats, river, pond, swamp, field, early successional.

Specialty birds: *Resident*—Tricolored and Little Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night-Heron, White Ibis, Barred and Great Horned Owls, Eastern Screech-Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, White-eyed Vireo, Brown-headed and White-breasted Nuthatches, Seaside Sparrow. *Summer*—Anhinga; Least Bittern; Reddish

Egret; Yellow-crowned Night-Heron; Wood Stork; Gull-billed, Sandwich, and Least Terns; Black Skimmer; Chuck-will's-widow; Painted Bunting. *Winter*—Bald Eagle, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Sora, Piping Plover, Marbled Godwit, Red Knot, Sedge Wren, Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows. *Migration*—Whimbrel, Black Tern.

Best times to bird: Year-round.

Directions: To reach Pinckney Island NWR from exit 8 on Interstate 95, drive east on U.S. Highway 278 toward Hilton Head. After 17.7 miles turn left into the entrance for the refuge. To reach Fish Haul Creek Park from the intersection of US 278 Express (Cross Island Parkway) and US 278 Business (Fording Island Road), follow US 278 Business. After 2.1 miles turn left at the traffic light on Beach City Road. Follow Beach City Road 2.1 miles and turn right into the parking lot for the park. To reach Sea Pines Forest Preserve from Fish Haul Creek Park, return to US 278 and turn left. After 6.8 miles you will come to a traffic circle. Proceed straight through the traffic circle on Greenwood Drive. After 0.3 mile you will come to a guard station for the Sea Pines Plantation. From the entrance gate, drive 1.0 mile and you will see the parking area for the Sea Pines Forest Preserve on your left.

The Birding

The vast trail network at **Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge** is accessible by foot or bike only. It could take you longer than a day to hike the more than 10 miles of trails on the island. The refuge is a popular hiking area for tourists on Hilton Head, so you may want to get started early if you want to beat the crowds. As you drive down the 0.6-mile entrance road to the parking lot, be sure to look for Painted Buntings on the wires during summer. Year-round there are often White Ibis, Little Blue Heron, and other wading birds in the salt marsh along the road.

Before you start hiking the trails, pick up a trail map from the kiosk at the trailhead. The main trail is a gravel road that runs the entire length of the island. The salt marsh along the main trail can be good for Sharp-tailed Sparrow in winter and Seaside Sparrow year-round. In the summer scan the forest edges for Painted Bunting and the salt marsh for Gull-billed Tern. During fall the refuge can be a good area to look for migrating warblers, thrushes, vireos, and other songbirds.

The best birding area on the refuge, **Ibis Pond**, is located 0.6 mile from the trailhead. In the summer there may be a heron rookery in the island of trees at



Salt marsh along the main trail at Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge

the center of the pond. During drought years the birds will not nest because of a lack of freshwater. Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, Snowy and Cattle Egrets, and Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons have all been known to breed in the rookery. Although Wood Storks do not breed in the rookery, a few can often be seen roosting with the herons. You should also be able to find Anhinga, Least Bittern, and Painted Bunting around the pond in summer. During winter look for Bufflehead, Sora, White-eyed Vireo, Gray Catbird, Sedge Wren, Common Yellowthroat, and Swamp Sparrow around the pond.

Continue down the main trail from Ibis Pond and you will come to two more ponds, **Osprey** and **Wood Stork Ponds**. These two ponds can contain small numbers of Bufflehead and Hooded Merganser in winter and Wood Duck year-round. During summer you should be able to find more feeding, roosting, and nesting wading birds in the ponds. If you continue farther down the main trail from the ponds, you will come to a longleaf pine forest that can be good for Wild Turkey, Northern Bobwhite, Pileated Woodpecker, and White-breasted Nuthatch year-round.

Fish Haul Creek Park is a great spot to look for shorebirds and terns on the northern end of Hilton Head Island. From the parking area, follow the 0.3-mile trail that leads to the beach, taking you through a live oak forest that can be good for migrating songbirds in spring and fall. The short boardwalk leading out into the salt marsh is a good spot to look for Clapper Rail and Seaside Sparrow year-round. During winter look for Northern Harrier and Saltmarsh and Nelson's

Sharp-tailed Sparrows. In the summer you have a good chance of seeing Wood Stork and Painted Bunting.

Once you reach the beach, start looking for shorebirds, gulls, terns, and skimmers on the **Port Royal Flats**, an extensive stretch of mudflats on the northern end of Hilton Head Island where it borders Port Royal Sound. The Port Royal Flats are more than 5 miles long and can extend up to 0.5 mile from shore during low tide. The best time to see birds is when the tide is about halfway out. At low tide the birds are often too far out to see, while at high tide they find other areas to roost. It is often best to have a spotting scope at all tidal stages. During winter you should be able to find good numbers of Marbled Godwit here, as well as American Oystercatcher; Red Knot; Short-billed Dowitcher; Western Sandpiper; Dunlin; and Black-bellied, Piping, and Semipalmated Plovers. During migration look for Whimbrel and Black Tern. If you are lucky, in the fall or winter you may be able to find a Merlin or Peregrine Falcon hunting along the marsh and beach. During summer the beach and flats are great spots to look for Gull-billed, Royal, Sandwich, and Least Terns and Black Skimmer. Keep an eye out for Reddish Egret on the flats late in the summer.

Sea Pines Forest Preserve, located within Sea Pines Plantation on the southern tip of Hilton Head Island, can be a great spot to look for migrating songbirds in fall. During winter, Christmas Bird Counts can yield more than a hundred species within the preserve. The 605-acre preserve contains a variety of habitats, including mixed pine forest, swamps, grassy fields, and several small freshwater lakes. The preserve is an oasis for birds, surrounded by the ever-increasing development on the southern end of Hilton Head. Be sure to pick up a trail map at the kiosk in the parking lot so that you can navigate the preserve's more than 7 miles of trails.

In the fall look for migrating warblers, thrushes, vireos, and other songbirds throughout Sea Pine Forest Preserve, especially along the forest edges. During winter you should be able to find Ring-necked, Ruddy, and Wood Ducks; Bufflehead; and Hooded Merganser on the lakes. The lakes are so close to the ocean that they even occasionally have scoters and other sea ducks during winter. The island in the middle of Lake Mary once contained a large heron rookery, but the birds abandoned it during a drought several years ago and have not returned. It is hoped that one day the island may once again host a large heron rookery. A night walk through the preserve is a good way to hear and perhaps catch a glimpse of Barred and Great Horned Owls and Eastern Screech-Owl year-round and Chuck-will's-widow during the summer.

General Information

Pinckney Island NWR, Fish Haul Creek Park, and Sea Pines Forest Preserve are all open year-round from dawn to dusk. Admission to Sea Pines Forest Preserve is \$5 per car.

DeLorme atlas: Pinckney Island NWR, page 63, C7; Fish Haul Creek Park, page 63, C8; Sea Pines Forest Preserve, page 63, E6.

Elevation: 0 to 10 feet.

Hazards: Ticks, venomous snakes, alligators, mosquitoes.

Nearest food, gas, lodging: Hilton Head.

Camping: Hunting Island State Park.

For more information: Pinckney Island NWR; Sea Pines Forest Preserve Foundation.

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American Oystercatcher (4)	Eastern Towhee (2)
Semipalmated Plover (3)	Chipping Sparrow (2)
Least Tern	Field Sparrow
Barred Owl	Henslow’s Sparrow
Red-cockaded Woodpecker (5)	Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow (2)
Eastern Kingbird	Seaside Sparrow
Blue-headed Vireo	Rusty Blackbird
Brown-headed Nuthatch (4)	

No matter your birding skill level, you will find the information contained in this guide to be invaluable to finding birds in South Carolina. The guide provides detailed descriptions of the forty best bird-watching areas in the state, grouped into four regions: coast, coastal plain, piedmont, and mountains. Within each region are descriptions of some of South Carolina’s best bird-watching areas. For each area, you will find driving directions, a bird species list, the best season(s) to visit, habitat types, and other useful information. In addition to the detailed descriptions of South Carolina’s finest bird-watching sites, the guide also contains many useful tools for finding birds in the state. A status and distribution chart for 349 of South Carolina’s bird species, developed specifically for this guide, will help you determine how likely you are to see each species and when to search for it. The birding calendar can help you plan your trips so that you will be in the right place at the right time to witness thousands of migrating Broad-winged Hawks, hundreds of Wood Storks feeding, Reddish Egrets dancing in the surf, and many other dazzling experiences that you won’t want to miss. Also included is a list of South Carolina specialty birds, which provides a description of the best habitats and areas to visit for more than 175 of the most sought-after species in the state.

How to Use This Guide

Each of the forty bird-watching areas selected for this guide have been assigned a name and number. An area may contain several birding sites. For example, the Charleston Harbor East birding area contains descriptions of four sites: Patriots Point, Pitt Street Bridge, Fort Moultrie, and Breach Inlet. In order to make this guide as user-friendly as possible, the information for each of the forty birding areas has been divided into the following sections:

Habitats: This section lists all the different types of habitat that can be found in the area. Knowing the habitats found at a site will help give you an idea of what kinds of birds to expect. Refer to this chapter’s “Habitats” section for a description of each type and a brief list of the bird species typical of that habitat.

Specialty birds: This section lists some of the bird species that are likely to be encountered in the area. Birds that are considered to be rare or accidental in the area were not included in this section. The specialty birds are divided into four categories: *Resident*—birds that can be found at the site all year long; *Summer*—birds that can be found during June and July; *Winter*—birds that can be found November through March; *Migration*—birds that are seen at the site only during spring (April and May) and/or fall (August through October) migrations. Birds that can be found during summer or winter in South Carolina were omitted from the “Migration” category. See Appendix C, “Specialty Birds of South Carolina,” for more information on the best times and locations to find many of the birds listed in this section. In many cases, common birds that have widespread distributions throughout South Carolina have been omitted from the specialty birds section, unless the area contains a particularly high number of the species.

Best times to bird: Certain seasons of the year may be better than others for birding at a particular site. This section suggests the best time(s) of year to visit the area.

Directions: This section includes directions to reach the area. The directions often start from the intersection of two major roads or an interstate highway exit. Directions to specific birding locations within the area are given in the “The Birding” section. For some areas, the driving directions section has been omitted and the directions are given in the “The Birding” section.

The Birding: This section will guide you through the area and help you find the best locations to observe birds. Specific emphasis is given to South Carolina’s specialty birds or birds that are difficult to find in the state. Some terms that are used frequently throughout this section are *songbirds*, *seabirds*, *pelagic birds*, *sea ducks*, *wading birds*, *raptors*, and *shorebirds*. *Songbirds* refers to the perching birds such as vireos, warblers, thrushes, tanagers, sparrows, and finches. *Seabirds* are birds that live in the ocean close to shore, like terns, skimmers, gulls, and pelicans. *Pelagic birds* are found in the deep ocean many miles from shore and include petrels, storm-petrels, and shearwaters. *Sea ducks* refers to ducks that are often found only in the ocean, such as scoters, eiders, and the Long-tailed Duck. *Wading birds* are birds in the family Ardeidae, like herons and egrets. *Raptors* refers to birds of prey, such as hawks, eagles, falcons, and kites. *Shorebirds* are birds in the order Charadriiformes and include sandpipers, dowitchers, and phalaropes.

General Information: This section contains information about the logistics of planning your trip, including entrance fees, hours of operation, and facilities. If no information is given about an entrance fee, there was not a fee at the time of this writing. Please keep in mind that entrance fees and hours of operation may have changed since this book was written. If you plan on visiting state parks on a regular basis, it may be worthwhile to buy a \$50 annual pass that will give you free admission into all of South Carolina’s state parks.

DeLorme atlas: One of the best atlases that you can buy to navigate South Carolina's back roads is the DeLorme *South Carolina Atlas & Gazetteer*. This section provides the DeLorme atlas page number and grid for the area. The DeLorme atlas can be bought at many of the larger bookstores or online at <http://shop.delorme.com>.

Hazards: This section lists any hazards that may be encountered in the area. These are only *potential* hazards, and in most cases you are unlikely to have any problems with them. This information is not meant to discourage you from visiting the area, but rather to prepare you to avoid potential hazards. For a detailed description of each hazard, see the "Planning Your Trip" section of this chapter.

Nearest food, gas, lodging: Here you will find the nearest town that provides at least a few different options for food, gas, and lodging.

Camping: This section lists the nearest public campground. In cases where there are no public campgrounds within a reasonable distance of the area, this section has been omitted. Contact information for each campground is listed in Appendix E.

For more information: To get more information about the area, look up the organization listed in this section in Appendix E. The appendix contains the addresses and phone numbers for many of the birding areas listed in the guide. With GPS navigation systems in cars becoming more and more prevalent, the addresses listed in Appendix E can be particularly useful in getting directions to a location.

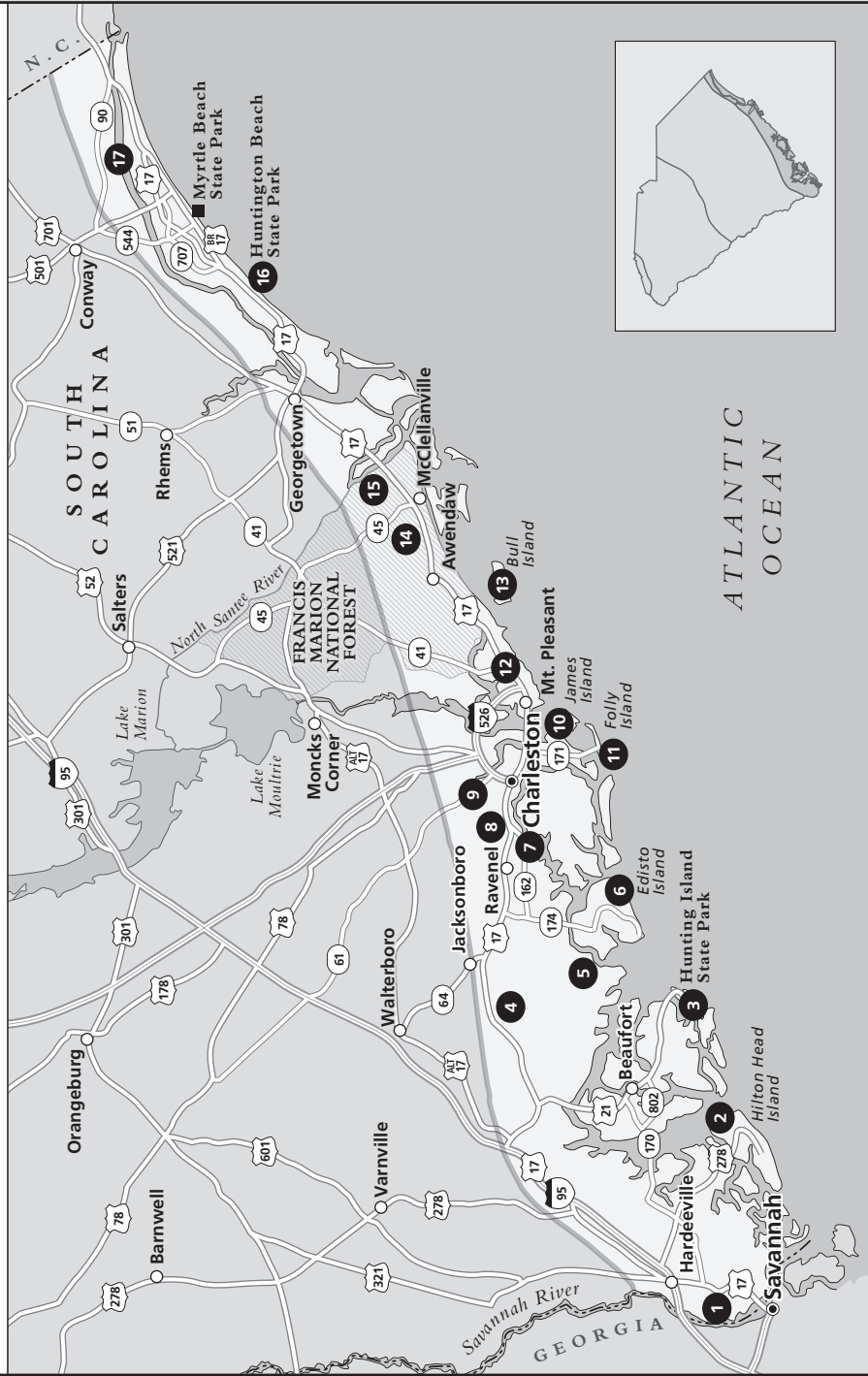
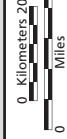
Climate and Topography

For the purposes of this book, I have divided South Carolina into four physiographic regions: coast, coastal plain, piedmont, and mountains. Most South Carolina guides consider the coast to be a part of the coastal plain and often refer to the coast as the "outer coastal plain." However, since there are so many bird species that are found only along the immediate coast, it is necessary to treat the coast as a separate physiographic region. South Carolina has a subtropical climate with hot, humid summers and mild winters.

Coast: The coast extends from beaches along the Atlantic Ocean to roughly 25 miles inland. The elevation in this region ranges from sea level to 150 feet. The average temperatures during the summer are 74 to 87 degrees Fahrenheit. In winter, average temperatures are 43 to 59 degrees. The coast receives an average precipitation of 48 inches per year. This region is typified by its barrier islands, beaches, salt marshes, cypress swamps, and longleaf pine forests. More than 600,000 people live along the coast, and resorts in Myrtle Beach, Charleston, and Hilton Head attract hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. Locals often refer to this region as the "Lowcountry."

Because of the wide variety of habitats in this region, it supports the highest diversity of bird species in the state. Birding on the coast is good to excellent

Coast



SOUTH CAROLINA

GEORGIA

ATLANTIC OCEAN



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