

SEA ISLAND LIFE

SPRING/SUMMER 2014

OUT ON THE WATER

EXPLORE THE MARSHES,
OCEAN SEINING, BEACH
WORKOUTS AND MORE



THE NATIONAL BIRD
MAKES A COMEBACK

DESIGNING A NEW
FASHION CAPITAL

INSIDE THE
SMOKEHOUSE


THE NEWEST
WAY TO SIP





MARSH DISCOVERY

THE SCENIC COASTAL SALT MARSHES PROVIDE
FOOD AND HABITAT FOR ANIMALS WHILE OFFERING
OPPORTUNITIES FOR BOTH ADVENTURE AND
RELAXATION FOR HUMAN VISITORS. BY JOE RADA



One step is all it takes. It might be that slight step on the brakes as visitors island-hop along the causeway, slowing to scan the salt marshes fringing each landmass. It might be that first solid thud, stepping onto a dock, the sound ringing louder than expected in the natural stillness. It might be that wobbly step into a kayak, the last taken before spending a delightful hour or two with arms and tides doing the work while paddling past shorelines, creek banks and mud flats, watching for wildlife among tall marsh grasses swaying in the sea breeze.

Taking any of these steps on Sea Island marks a welcomed transition from the hectic world left behind. Moods improve as people slip into island time, noting the beauty and wonder of the area. For many repeat visitors, the distinctive sight and smell of salt marshes, teeming with birds and fish, and plants that aren't found anywhere else, is a clear indication that they have returned to Georgia's barrier islands.

About 379,000 acres of salt marshes cover Georgia's shoreline, providing habitat for fish, migratory birds and other wildlife.



Kayak tours provide an immersive experience for wetlands explorers.



Stand-up paddleboard tours at sunset offer picturesque views of the salt marshes.

Marshes never fail to intrigue and inspire, whether they are approached on foot through maritime forests, seen from piers, boardwalks or balconies, or skirted up-close in kayaks, fishing boats or sailboats. Stand-up paddleboards, a popular new mode of water transportation, provide yet another unique way to encounter marshes from an intimate perspective.

No matter how the marshes are navigated, spring and summer are especially good seasons for exploring these tide-washed ecosystems as marsh-inhabiting animals are abundant and plant life grows like gangbusters. Additionally, exploring the marshes involves activities that double as physical exercise, head-clearing relaxation and attitude-improving pursuits, so it's healthy for the body, mind and spirit.

Wetland Wonders

Gavin Earl knows the rejuvenating value of venturing into the marshes. Better still, the avid waterman, paddle sports guide and sailing instructor at Sea Island also knows the where, when and how of outdoor endeavors. That makes him worth looking up when visiting Sea Island's new sailing school and boat dock on Rainbow Island.

“More people than ever are asking about the marshes. They want to know more about the plants and animals.”

—GAVIN EARL

“More people than ever are asking about the marshes,” Earl explains. “They want to know more about the plants and animals, so they sign up for activities that put them out there. I’m glad because I know how interesting the marshes are and I know the physical activity is good for their health, too.”

Earl schedules kayaking, sailing, fishing and paddleboarding tours, each with optional forays into marshes, where he and other knowledgeable guides expound upon the natural world.

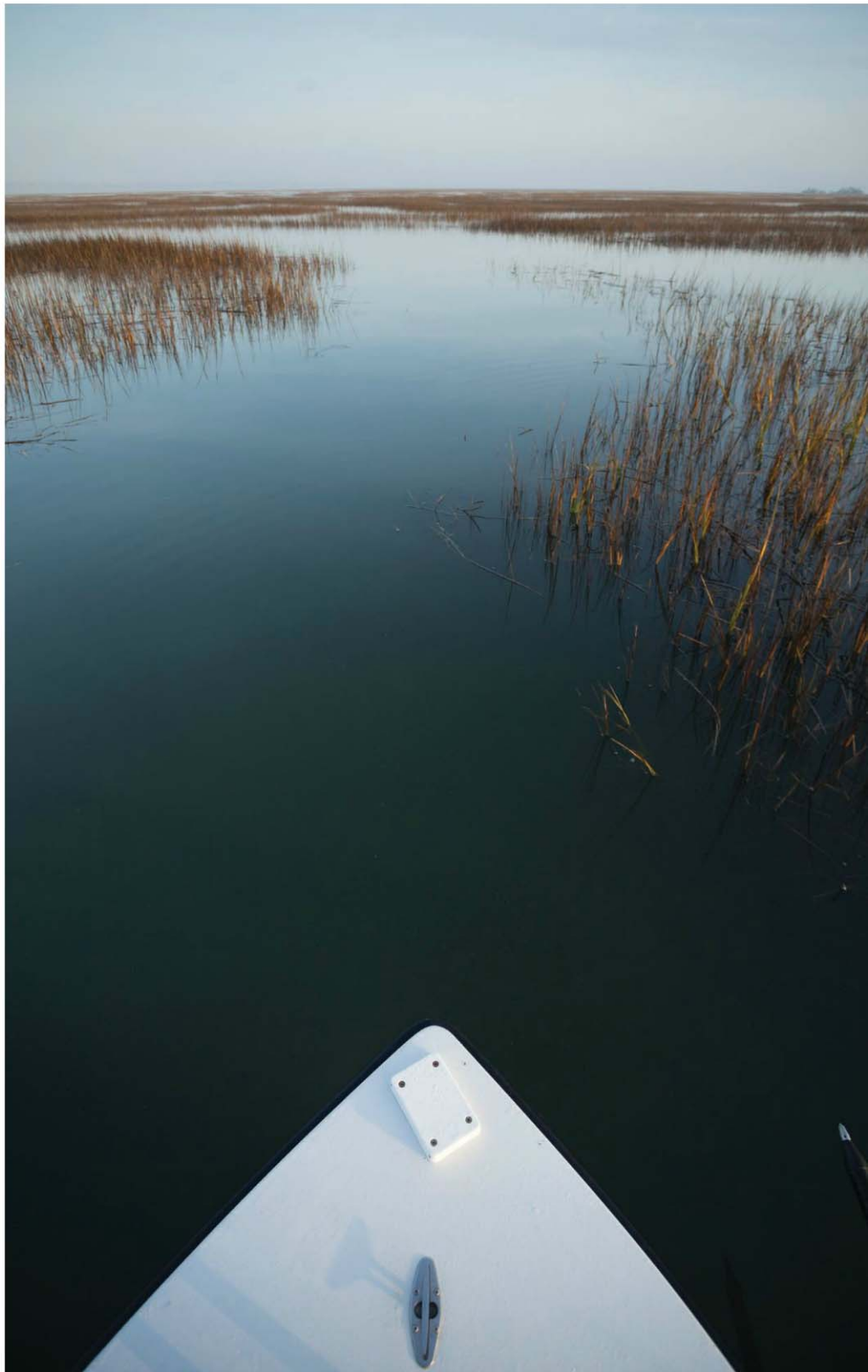
“Much of Village Creek, the waterway between Sea Island and St. Simons Island, is lined with marsh,” he says. “That whole area is loaded with oyster beds and mud flats. It’s like an all-you-can-eat buffet to shorebirds eating fiddler crabs, ghost crabs, horseshoe crabs, shrimp and fish. Sometimes we spot mink, raccoons and deer at the edges of marshes and sand dunes or river otters swimming in open waters.

“When we get a little closer, we see other kinds of plants mixed with the tall cordgrass the marsh is best known for and ... the sea oats growing on the dunes,” he adds. “Sea oxide daisies, for example, produce little, yellow daisy-like flowers during spring and summer. A species of morning glory has flowers that open every morning in season, just like the name suggests.”

As for when to explore the wetlands, Earl says every time of day offers something different and interesting. “I like being out there best at sunset, leading a kayak tour or a stand-up paddleboard tour when everything turns that glowing golden color,” he explains. “Early morning, when there’s a mist swirling around, is good, too. At night, with a clear sky and the stars out, you can sit on a dock and hear the sounds of the marsh after dark. Any time is good, really. Nature never ceases to amaze.”

Fabulous Flora and Fauna

Marshes are not just beautiful; they are also a vital resource—and one that’s dwindling. “Our best estimate is that we have about 379,000 acres of salt marsh here on Georgia’s 100 miles of shoreline, all in a narrow band of estuaries between the barrier islands and



Rainbow Island Water Sports center offers equipment and tours for discovering the marshes.



Marshes provide food and breeding sites for herons, wood storks and other shorebirds.

the mainland,” explains Paul Medders, a marine biologist with the Brunswick-based Georgia Department of Natural Resources Coastal Resources Division. “That’s a significant portion of the remaining healthy salt marsh on the East Coast, so we need to appreciate it.”

Medders, a Brunswick native involved in marine research, education and outreach, explains that salt marshes are like nurseries for many commercially, recreationally and ecologically important species. “Without marshes, we’d have no shellfish to eat, no oysters, clams, shrimp or crabs,” Medders says. “Without marshes, we’d have no spotted sea trout, red drum, whiting, grouper and other sport fish to catch.”

In fact, a report issued by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

points out that the nation’s coastal wetlands are critical to the survival of diverse fish and wildlife species, as they “provide resting, feeding and breeding habitat for 75 percent of the nation’s waterfowl and other migratory birds.” Also, according to the report, wetlands help to improve water quality, protect coastal communities from the effects of severe storms and sustain the country’s coastal fisheries and outdoor recreation industries.

In the remaining wetlands, a species of tall grass (*Spartina alterniflora*), commonly called smooth cordgrass, is key to the life cycle of other marshland plants and animals. “It’s a halophyte, meaning it can live in fresh or salt water,” Medders says. “It out-competes other plants and survives in a very harsh environment because of unique adaptation, the ability to expel salt crystals.

Everything else that is living in a marsh depends on *Spartina* as it grows and then dies and decays, releasing nutrients.”

Plant life in the marsh is all about elevation and nutrient-delivering tides, he says. Slight changes in elevation under water and on low-lying landscapes make all the difference. “For plants, it’s a question of are they ever covered with salt water, and how often and for how long are they covered? Those factors determine which plants live where,” he explains. These plants range from *Spartina* standing in salt water, to flowering sea oxides and black needlerushes at the edges of higher ground, to red cedar and shrubby silverling and a cactus-like plant called glasswort thriving in drier areas.

Marsh animals, whether aquatic, terrestrial or avian, feed on marsh plants or other marsh animals. “You’ll see herons, wood



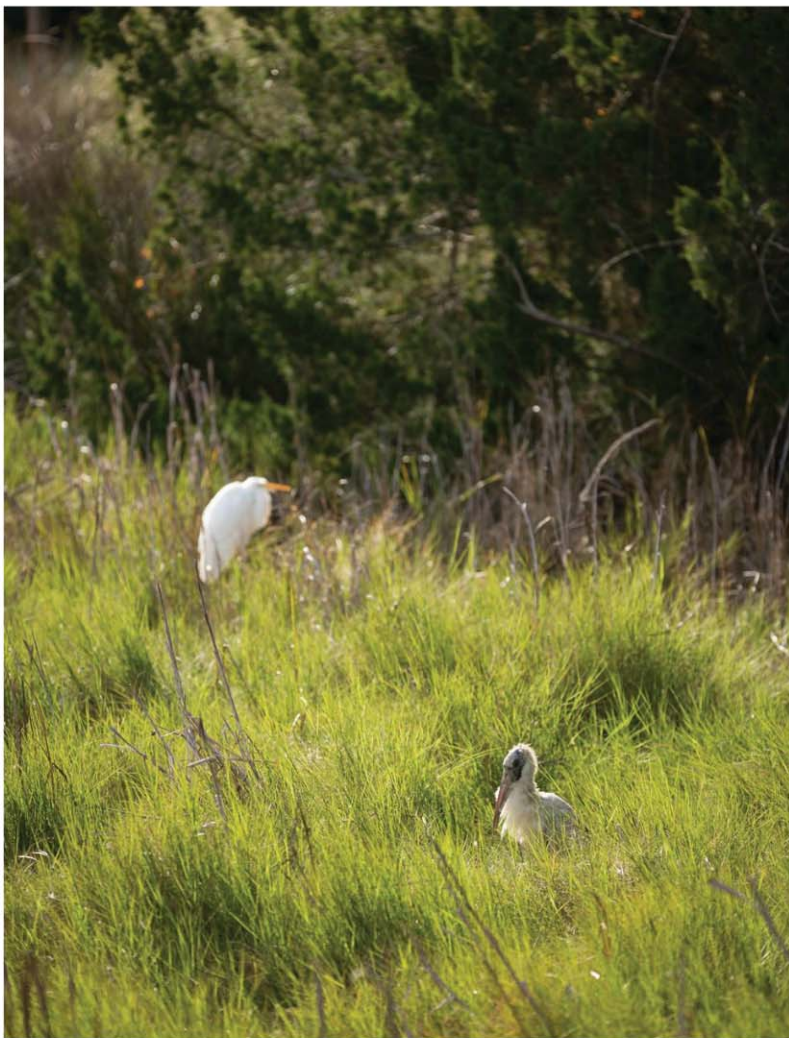
A WALK TO REMEMBER

For those who want to see even more of the wetlands up-close, Gavin Earl, paddle sports guide and sailing instructor at Sea Island, recommends a number of vantage points: Walk along the beach near Pelican Spit, a sandbar off the north end of Sea Island, or Gould's Inlet, on the north end of St. Simons, for a great view of marshes across the creek.

"You see pelicans, skimmers, oystercatchers and other birds feasting there," he says. "The mouth of Postell Creek at Gould's Inlet, right near the U.S. Coast Guard Station, is another good location. You can also see marshes from just about any boat dock or fishing pier or bridge around here."

He also recommends viewing from the new boat ramp and Earth Day Nature Trail, which starts under Brunswick's Sidney Lanier Bridge. The self-guided trail features wooden boardwalks, wildlife observation decks, educational signage and an outdoor pavilion with seating.

For more walking options, Earl suggests a path on Rainbow Island that leads to the end of the marsh hammock. There, people can see various types of birds, including western kings, scouts orioles and alder flycatchers. The area's flora is also a big draw. "Several different types of plants start to bloom in the spring in the marsh grass," he adds.



storks, egrets and other shorebirds feeding all day in the marsh," Medders describes. "[An] interesting thing about egrets: By day they spread out and hunt individually, stalking fish in shallow waters, but at night they flock close together, sometimes by the thousands, to roost in trees at the edges of the marshes."

People like Medders and Earl, who spend a great deal of time in the coastal marshes, inevitably alternate between sharing this kind of vivid detail and then waxing philosophical about what it all means. Given a moment to reflect, Medders sums up his devotion to marshes: "I believe that we humans are inherently connected to the natural world. The more we move away from it, the more we learn how much we need it. I also think it is very important to get out into nature and experience it." ○