

SEA ISLAND LIFE

SPRING/SUMMER 2013



**THE
NEXT-GENERATION
GOLFER**
FINELY TUNED
ATHLETES
HIT THE COURSE

WILD TO TABLE
REVIVING THE
OLDEST CULINARY
TREND

**UNEXPECTED
BEAUTY**
GEORGIA'S MARSHES
THROUGH THE LENS

**KEEPING
TRADITIONS
ALIVE**

FAMILY TIME IN THE
GREAT OUTDOORS



INTO THE MARSHES

Georgia's marshes are an unexpected source of beauty and inspiration for amateur and professional photographers.

BY JOE RADA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIOT VANOTTEREN

A great blue heron wades among spring-green marsh grass in a hazy morning fog. The heron poises for flight, spreading its wings, bending its pencil-thin legs for takeoff, rising gracefully, and retreats deeper into the marsh and out of sight.

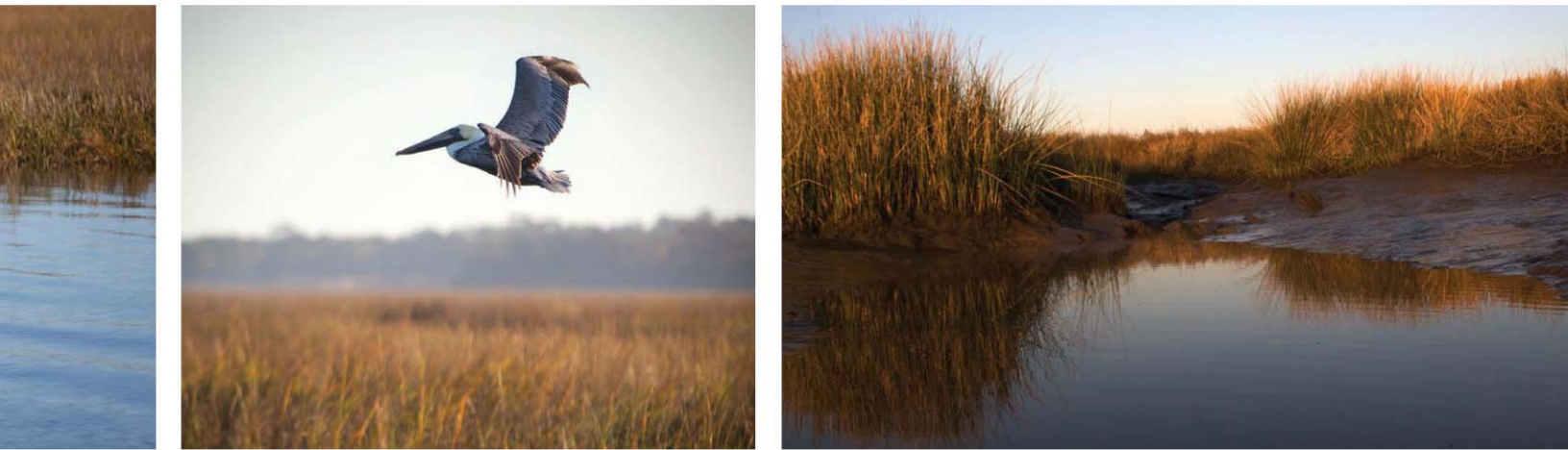
The vast salt marshes along Georgia's coast are home to many of these elegant creatures as well as crucial populations of fish and shellfish, and unique plant life. A critical part of the coastal ecosystem, Georgia hosts about one-third of the salt marsh habitat on the East Coast. And many visitors and residents have discovered that combinations of beach, ocean, river and salt marsh provide endless subject matter for photography or just enjoying the view. "There's just so much incredible beauty to see," says Eliot VanOtteren, Sea Island staff photographer, who has captured the beauty of the marshes through his lens for years. Once familiar with the marshes' charm, nature lovers enjoy kayaking through the peaceful waters and admiring their environs from the docks that line the shores, many with cameras in hand.





“The first time I saw barrier islands and marshes was on the Georgia coast,” VanOtteren says. “It’s a fascinating landscape that was entirely new to me, and I’ve enjoyed discovering it ever since. It’s exciting, finding natural wonders everywhere.” Georgia’s coast is about 100 miles long and has an estimated total of 378,000 acres of saltwater marsh. Georgia’s saltwater marshes are some of the most biologically productive ecosystems in the world.

Many photographers, both amateur and professional, are exploring the natural wonders of the barrier islands and the marshes through activities such as nature walks, bike rides, kayaking and canoeing. While fishing is ideally done from a kayak, canoeing offers the perfect vantage point for photography. “The canoe is a little more stable, lowering my risk of tipping over with my gear,” VanOtteren says. Also in a canoe, photographers can reach remote places and get a unique perspective. Some photographers can even be found heading out in pitch dark to get great shots. “My favorite time to shoot the marshes is just before sunrise when there’s a golden haze and a little fog, and



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—ELIOT VANOTTEREN

then the sunlight comes slanting in. There’s a lot of ‘hurry up and wait’ until daybreak, but it’s worthwhile,” VanOtteren says.

Breathtaking pictures are sure to reward a photographer’s patience. Those who have a watchful eye and the time to take in their surroundings may spot egrets, wood storks, roseate spoonbills, herons, ospreys and other shorebirds wading or soaring. The wildlife-rich marshes also provide the setting for alligators sunning themselves, wild pigs rooting for food, and bald eagles perching on driftwood. Meandering creeks and bridges high and low are also images that can be captured with a little time and exploration.

“Some people, when they envision marshes, think of exposed mud they’ve seen at low tide and imagine getting stuck in it,” VanOtteren says. “It’s actually very beautiful, and when the

tide’s in, you can float really close to all kinds of wildlife there.

“I’ve seen a stingray slide past under my canoe, a dolphin break the surface just off my bow, horseshoe crabs crowding a tidepool, and thousands of little fiddler crabs scurrying around. Surprises like that keep it constantly interesting.”

The abundance of animal life is evidence that the marshes along the Georgia coast are among the most biologically productive habitats in the world; the Georgia Department of Natural Resources reports that they are four times more productive than the most carefully cultivated cornfield. The ebb and flow of the tides nourish the grass that populates the estuaries, as well as carry that grass along the streams, feeding small fish, crustaceans and other small organisms, which in turn feed larger animals further up the

food chain. This plethora and diversity of flora and fauna make the marshes the perfect place to capture nature through a camera.

“There’s real beauty in the marsh, and it changes through the seasons,” VanOtteren adds. “In May and June, the grass is bright green. In September and October, it turns golden-yellow. In winter, it becomes shades of caramel that look amazing in the right light.” Constantly surrounded by nature and terrific scenery on Georgia’s barrier islands, the photographer says, “Sometimes I’ll go out with no plan and just wander on foot or on the water, seeing things I didn’t even know to look for, which is a noteworthy tip for anyone interested in photographing the marshes.

“I’m constantly fascinated by these islands and marshes,” he says. “That’s where I want to be, every chance I get.” ○