



Winter is an excellent time for observing nature in the ACE Basin, as these birdwatchers discover.

A Winter Trip Afield in the ACE Basin

Article by Tom Marcinko ❖ Photos by Dan Johnson

"Nowhere else in the world has nature been kinder to her children than in those regions where the great plantations were formed out of the Eden-like wilderness of the Low Country." – Archibald Rutledge

As the South Carolina coast gradually eases into winter, nature subtly responds to the change in seasons. The Low Country's entrance into the colder months isn't as dramatic as other areas, but those familiar with its personality appreciate its beauty. Evenings become cool and crisp, the wind off the Atlantic tastes saltier, the color of the marsh grass changes from vibrant green to gold and amber, the constellation Orion (Mighty Hunter) appears earlier in the night sky, and migratory waterfowl arrive to spend the season along the coast. The passage into winter provides outdoor enthusiasts with an opportunity to escape anonymously into some of the most pristine areas along the East Coast to observe these migrating birds.

The number of ducks swells dramatically as migrants arrive to spend the winter, many at ante-bellum rice plantations that dot the Low Country landscape. Here they take advantage of the available food and the area's moderate climate. Common species that visit the



This page: winter scenes at Poco Sabo. Opposite: Rice fields provide habitat for ibis (top) and coots (center), while chimney ruins at Willtown Plantation stand in remembrance of a bygone era.

Low Country include the blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, northern pintail, northern shoveler, gadwall, mallard, American widgeon, black duck, scaup and ring-necked duck. Many of these migrants are categorized as “dabbling” ducks; they seldom dive for their food, but instead tip their tails in the air and feed with their heads underwater. Their diet consists primarily of aquatic plants, invertebrates and sundry insects—all of which are abundant at the coast.

In winter, birdwatchers can take to the field without the oppressive heat and biting insects of warmer seasons. One of the more rewarding sites to birdwatch is the ACE Basin. The ACE is located at the confluence of the Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto rivers, which forms a basin of approximately 350,000 acres. The area encompasses various habitats characteristic of the Low Country: barrier islands, beaches, fresh-

and saltwater marshes, forested wetlands, and pine and hardwood forests.

Settled by Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries, the locale became a center for rice cultivation. Planters relied extensively on slaves to work the labor-intensive crop, and by the mid-19th Century the region had risen to prominence as one of the country’s largest producers of rice. The Civil War temporarily halted crop production, and several successive natural disasters in the early 20th Century combined with strongly increased competition to end commercial rice cultivation here.

Today, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited and private citizens cooperate to manage much of the area. Their agreement emphasizes protecting and preserving the natural habitat and



continuing traditional uses of the ACE Basin. It stresses venerable land usages such as agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing. Currently, more than 125,000 acres are under protection, including more than 11,000 acres in the ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuge.

The ACE Basin refuge is divided into two sections: the Combahee unit on the Combahee River outside Yemassee, and the Edisto Unit near Adams Run on the Edisto River. Located within the refuge boundaries are miles of footpaths and trails circumnavigating the old rice fields and other abandoned agricultural areas. The same rice fields that once served as the area's economic backbone now provide food and habitat for migratory waterfowl.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages the refuge. Its main office is in the former Grove Plantation house in the Edisto section. Grove Plantation, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, possesses a storied past. The plantation came into existence in 1828 when Dr. George Morris constructed the main house on land he purchased earlier in the century. After his death in 1834, his wife and then his son, George Jr., managed the plantation.

Rumors circulated that George Jr. had trained his horse to climb the stairs to his second-story bedroom and deposit him there after a long night of drinking. George developed health problems and accumulated heavy debt; both afflictions possibly contributed to his suicide in 1857. To settle the large family debts, his widow sold the Grove to John Berkely Grimball in 1858.

At the onset of the Civil War, the Grimball family left the plantation. The male family members enlisted in the Confederate Army, while the remainder moved to Spartanburg to avoid the direct impact of the war. Because they had abandoned the plantation, the federal government ultimately confiscated the Grove.

The government returned the plantation to the Grimball family in 1866. Unable to recover from the economic devastation of the war, they lost the property. Since the late 19th Century, the plantation has changed ownership many times.

In 1992, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased the almost 2,000 acres as part of the ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuge.

A trip to the Edisto section of the refuge begins with the approach to the main plantation house down a lane bordered by live oaks draped in Spanish moss. At the refuge office, the



wildlife service provides an array of information on the refuge including maps, species lists and general information about the area. Rangers can suggest locations to see the various species of birds during different seasons. In winter, visitor access is permitted only in certain portions of the impoundments, in order to minimize waterfowl disturbance. Hiking is allowed on the entire length of the dikes on the landward side of the impoundments, but only a short distance up the dikes into the heart of the rice fields.

The impoundment trail begins behind the plantation house, winding through an oak forest before reaching the levees and dikes. Hiking through the mixed hardwoods around the plantation, you occasionally may flush a barred owl from its roost. As the trail meanders between cattail-filled ponds, you might glimpse the resident otters.

Though chance encounters with such mammals are uncommon, the opportunity to see and observe creatures other than birds is another aspect of the trip afield. It's a simple matter to detect telltale signs of animals—tracks of deer, raccoon, fox, even bobcat. Often you'll see many different types of tracks near a water source where animals come to drink and hunt. You also may discover animal bones—perhaps the remains of a predator's meal—or droppings.

Exiting the forest, the trail leads to antebellum rice fields, now home to migrant waterfowl. The levees provide a perfect backdrop to observe the bird life of the rice impoundments. Early in the morning, rafts of ducks are easily visible with the naked eye. A muffled breeze blows through the marsh grass as pintails lift off the water with an incredulous honking. You can see deep blue on the wings of a small flock of teal as they circle to land, and a flash of red and yellow on the blackbirds swarming through the tall grasses. You don't have to be an avid birder to appreciate the cacophony of sounds and sights nature has to show here.

Farther along the flooded fields, flocks of wading birds interspersed with an array of herons and egrets patiently and deftly hunt the shallows.



Species common at the refuge include ibises, great and little blue herons, tri-colored herons, green herons, and great and snowy egrets.

In addition to waterfowl and wading birds are the raptors: bald eagles, ospreys, red-tailed hawks and marsh hawks, among other species. Marsh hawks or harriers often glide low in search of rodents. In past years, a pair of bald eagles have nested and successfully fledged their young near the rice fields.

Another predator abundant in the refuge is the alligator. 'Gators are more

active and easily seen lounging in warm seasons, though in winter it is not rare to see one on the banks trying to absorb the sun's warmth.

Leaving the impoundments, the trail winds back into the hardwoods, following the path of an old railroad track until it eventually loops around to the main entrance down the live oak lane. The trail through the woods offers glimpses into the hardwood community during winter.

Complementing the flocks of yellow-rumped warblers moving through the branches are woodpeckers in abundance. Most of the species residing in the state can be seen on the property, including the brilliantly colored redheads, red-bellieds, large swooping pileateds, hairy and downys.

Coming out of the woods, the trail ends at the beginning of the live oak lane leading back to the plantation house.

Hiking and bird watching in coastal South Carolina allows you to experience unique landscapes. A day's exploration of the ACE can reinforce your appreciation and affection for the natural areas and habitats here. The sight of landing teal, the sound of the wind as it rushes through marsh grass and the pale heat of the winter sun are just a few of nature's vivid revelations. Each excursion has in store its own images and glimpses of nature—but they are reserved only for those who take the time to venture into the field. ❖

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