



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**BIRDING PLUS-Do the Charleston! Spring in South Carolina & Northern Georgia 2013**

Apr 27, 2013 to May 4, 2013

Jesse Fagan

*For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).*



*This is the view looking across Charleston's downtown area from the western entrance where the Savannah Highway crosses the Ashley River. In the distance, the lovely Arthur Ravenal Jr. Bridge, which spans the Cooper River on the eastern boundary. (Photo by tour participant Mike Boustead)*

A great tour with an extremely fun group and some excellent southern birding! Despite the rather unseasonably cool temperatures this year (especially in the mountains!), we managed to find most of the southern specialties. Bachman's Sparrow and Red-cockaded Woodpecker were seen very well in the longleaf pine-savannah in the Francis Marion National Forest, where we also had breeding Prothonotary Warbler and a vocal Barred Owl in the early predawn light. The shorebirding was pretty good along the coast, including a nice large flock on James Island with at least 10 species, but also excellent Clapper Rail and lingering Surf Scoter on Folly Island. The mountains of north Georgia were still bare and cool, but our walk along the Appalachian Trail was most productive. We saw a number of breeding warblers including Ovenbird, American Redstart, and Black-throated Blue Warbler. At other sites in the mountains we had Louisiana Waterthrush and breeding Scarlet Tanagers! Most memorable for some folks was our stop "to the mountains" at Francis Beidler Forest where we experienced a walk through a virgin cypress-tupelo forest with soaring Swallow-tailed Kites overhead. Wow! The group's favorite? A three-way tie between that Prothonotary Warbler, our cooperative Barred Owls, and the Sora at Ace Basin NWR. Nice choices.

And then there was all that great food and those interesting cultural sites! Shrimp-and-grits and southern BBQ, plus visits to the Charleston Museum (oldest in the nation), Dahlongea Gold Museum (site of the first US gold rush), and a city tour of Charleston focused on the African American influence (the Gullah culture) in the Holy City.

All in all: fun times and great birding. I hope to see y'all again real soon!

--Jesse aka Motmot (from Lima, Peru)

#### KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: \* = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

#### BIRDS

##### Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

**WOOD DUCK** (*Aix sponsa*) – One quick flyby at Ace Basin NWR.

**MOTTLED DUCK** (*Anas fulvigula*) – At least four different birds in flight at Ace Basin NWR. Unfortunately, never exposed enough to put the scope on them.

**RED-BREASTED MERGANSER** (*Mergus serrator*) – Several offshore while birding Folly Island. Winters in the thousands in the coastal Carolinas, but at this time most have moved back north.

Odontophoridae (New World Quail)

**NORTHERN BOBWHITE** (*Colinus virginianus*) [\*]

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

**WILD TURKEY** (*Meleagris gallopavo*) – One in the mountains of North Georgia.

Gaviidae (Loons)

**COMMON LOON** (*Gavia immer*) – Several still around the Charleston area. We had one flyover the Francis Marion NF headed north, and another at Pitt St. Bridge very close. The one at Pitt St. had already molted back into breeding plumage.

Ciconiidae (Storks)

**WOOD STORK** (*Mycteria americana*) – Several soaring over the Ace Basin.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

**DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT** (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) – Still numerous in the Charleston area, but most were heading back north.

Anhingidae (Anhingas)

**ANHINGA** (*Anhinga anhinga*) – Several "flying crosses" were seen in the Charleston area.

Pelecanidae (Pelicans)

**BROWN PELICAN** (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) – Very common in the coastal areas around Charleston.

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

**LEAST BITTERN** (*Ixobrychus exilis*) – At least two in the tall marsh grass at Ace Basin NWR.

**GREAT BLUE HERON** (*Ardea herodias*) – Seen on a couple of days.

**GREAT EGRET** (*Ardea alba*) – Seen on a couple of days.

**SNOWY EGRET** (*Egretta thula*) – Seen a few times on the tour.

**LITTLE BLUE HERON** (*Egretta caerulea*) – Just one individual at Pitt St. bridge.

**TRICOLORED HERON** (*Egretta tricolor*) – A least four total seen in the Charleston area.

**CATTLE EGRET** (*Bubulcus ibis*) – A number on the drive north to Dahlonga.

**GREEN HERON** (*Butorides virescens*) – Seen on a couple of different days.

**YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON** (*Nyctanassa violacea*) – Singles in Charleston and again at Francis Beidler.

Threskiornithidae (Ibises and Spoonbills)

**WHITE IBIS** (*Eudocimus albus*) – One incredible moment was seeing a large group feeding on the muddy floor of the Francis Beidler Forest. The contrast between their shocking white bodies and the dark, virgin cypress-tupelo forest was quite moving.

**GLOSSY IBIS** (*Plegadis falcinellus*) – Four in flight over Folly Island was a good sighting.

Cathartidae (New World Vultures)

**BLACK VULTURE** (*Coragyps atratus*) – Most days.

**TURKEY VULTURE** (*Cathartes aura*) – Every day of the tour.

Pandionidae (Osprey)

**OSPREY** (*Pandion haliaetus*) – Fairly common in the Charleston area including one on a nest at Pitt St. bridge.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

**SWALLOW-TAILED KITE** (*Elanoides forficatus*) – Another great experience for us at Francis Beidler was a pair soaring over the forest canopy. No doubt near a nest site. These birds had just returned from South America. It is known that the majority of eastern individuals make their migration over the Caribbean Sea, passing Cuba and moving up Florida.

**MISSISSIPPI KITE** (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) – One perched at Francis Beidler.

**COOPER'S HAWK** (*Accipiter cooperii*) – One flyover at Folly Island.

**BALD EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – One adult on a powerline post at the bridge crossing to Edisto Island.

**RED-SHOULDERED HAWK** (*Buteo lineatus*) [\*]

**BROAD-WINGED HAWK** (*Buteo platypterus*) – Singles in the mountains around Dahlonga.

**RED-TAILED HAWK** (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – One on the drive to Dahlonga.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

**CLAPPER RAIL (ATLANTIC COAST)** (*Rallus longirostris waynei*) – Seen quite well in the marsh grass (drying off!) as we crossed from Folly Island onto James Island. This coastal subspecies is darker (grayer overall) than other populations.

**SORA** (*Porzana carolina*) – Very nice looks at Ace Basin.

**COMMON GALLINULE** (*Gallinula galeata*) – One in the marshes at Ace Basin NWR.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

**BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER** (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – One with a big flock of shorebirds on James Island.

**SEMPALMATED PLOVER** (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) – At least 20 in the shorebird flock on James Island.

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)

**AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER** (*Haematopus palliatus*) – Seen well at Pitt Street Bridge.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

**WILLET** (*Tringa semipalmata*) – Fairly common in the Charleston area where the "Eastern" Willet is a breeder. "Western" Willet winters along the SC coast and we had one still lingering. The Western Willets are longer billed and longer legged, paler overall, than their eastern counterparts.

**LESSER YELLOWLEGS** (*Tringa flavipes*) – Two in the shorebird flock on James Island.

**WHIMBREL** (*Numenius phaeopus*) – On both days in the Charleston area.

**RUDDY TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria interpres*) – Two in the jetty rocks on Folly Island.

**RED KNOT** (*Calidris canutus*) – A group of ten birds flew by us while birding the beach on Folly Island.

**SANDERLING** (*Calidris alba*) – Singles in the Charleston area.

**SEMPALMATED SANDPIPER** (*Calidris pusilla*) – Several were in the shorebird flock on James Island when we first arrived, but they quickly disappeared.

**LEAST SANDPIPER** (*Calidris minutilla*) – Just one in the James Island shorebird flock.

**DUNLIN** (*Calidris alpina*) – We counted at least twenty and most were beginning to show their black bellies.

**SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER** (*Limnodromus griseus*) – At least 50 birds were seen in the James Island shorebird flock we found along the side of the road. We determined two subspecies were present: griseus (with white bellies) and hendersoni (with near completely orange underparts).

**LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER** (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) – Four or five birds mixed in with the shorebird flock looked good for breeding Long-billed Dowitcher.

#### *Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)*

**BONAPARTE'S GULL** (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) – A pretty good bird for coastal SC. We saw several at different spots, but very close on the beach at Sullivan's Island.

**LAUGHING GULL** (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) – Common in coastal Charleston.

**RING-BILLED GULL** (*Larus delawarensis*) – Good numbers still around.

**HERRING GULL (AMERICAN)** (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) – Also, pretty good numbers still around.

**GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL** (*Larus marinus*) – One first-cycle bird on Sullivan's Island was a good find.

**LEAST TERN** (*Sternula antillarum*) – A few seen in Charleston harbor.

**GULL-BILLED TERN** (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) – One very close over the marsh at Pitt Street Bridge.

**FORSTER'S TERN** (*Sterna forsteri*) – A few were around Folly Island and at the beach on Sullivan's Island. Most still in non-breeding (basic) plumage showing the "bandido" mask.

**ROYAL TERN** (*Thalasseus maximus*) – Fairly common in the Charleston area.

**SANDWICH TERN** (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) – Just one offshore at Sullivan's Island.

**BLACK SKIMMER** (*Rynchops niger*) – Good looks at Pitt Street Bridge.

#### *Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)*

**ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) – Every day of the tour.

**EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE** (*Streptopelia decaocto*) – Common on Folly Island.

**MOURNING DOVE** (*Zenaida macroura*) – Every day.

#### *Cuculidae (Cuckoos)*

**YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO** (*Coccyzus americanus*) [\*]

#### *Strigidae (Owls)*

**BARRED OWL** (*Strix varia*) – Amazing encounters both in the Francis Marion NF (in the early morning) and again at Francis Beidler (during the day!). Such a beautiful creature with a great voice.

#### *Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)*

**COMMON NIGHTHAWK** (*Chordeiles minor*) [\*]

**CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW** (*Antrostomus carolinensis*) – Seen very well along the entrance road to Ace Basin NWR.

#### *Apodidae (Swifts)*

**CHIMNEY SWIFT** (*Chaetura pelagica*) – Around the Charleston area.

#### *Trochilidae (Hummingbirds)*

**RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD** (*Archilochus colubris*) [\*]

#### *Picidae (Woodpeckers)*

**RED-HEADED WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) – Nice studies in the Francis Marion NF. The pattern on this one is very striking.

**RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes carolinus*) – Common in the coastal Carolinas.

**DOWNY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides pubescens*) – More common in the mountains of Georgia where we had it every day.

**HAIRY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides villosus*) – One at Preacher's Rock.

**RED-CKADED WOODPECKER** (*Picoides borealis*) – At least six individuals were seen in the Francis Marion NF. We had a pair around their cavities at dawn. Very cool. Federally endangered as it is completely dependent on mature longleaf pine stands.

**NORTHERN FLICKER (YELLOW-SHAFTED)** (*Colaptes auratus auratus*) – One at Vogel SP on the lawn.

**PILEATED WOODPECKER** (*Dryocopus pileatus*) – Heard a bunch of times, but finally caught up with one at eye level in Vogel SP.

#### *Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)*

**EASTERN WOOD-PEWEE** (*Contopus virens*) – Seen most days on this tour.

**ACADIAN FLYCATCHER** (*Empidonax virens*) – Heard a lot in the lowlands, but we had it nicely at Vogel SP in the mountains.

**EASTERN PHOEBE** (*Sayornis phoebe*) – Several in the mountains of north Georgia. There was a pair building a nest on a picnic bench in Amicalola

SP.

**GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHER** (*Myiarchus crinitus*) – Common in the Charleston area.

**EASTERN KINGBIRD** (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) – Seen well at Ace Basin NWR.

*Vireonidae (Vireos)*

**WHITE-EYED VIREO** (*Vireo griseus*) – It's voice is common in the scrubby understory in the Charleston area. We saw it well at Francis Marion NF.

**YELLOW-THROATED VIREO** (*Vireo flavifrons*) – One that danced around us in the parking lot at Francis Beidler.

**BLUE-HEADED VIREO** (*Vireo solitarius*) – Common in the mountains of north Georgia where a number were singing and seen very well.

**RED-EYED VIREO** (*Vireo olivaceus*) – One of the most common passerines encountered on this tour.

*Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)*

**BLUE JAY** (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – Common. Every day of the tour.

**AMERICAN CROW** (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – More common in and around the mountains of north Georgia, but also in the Charleston area (where more difficult to separate from Fish Crow).

**FISH CROW** (*Corvus ossifragus*) – Seen a few times in the Charleston area. They are often in large flocks and the call is distinctive of course.

*Hirundinidae (Swallows)*

**PURPLE MARTIN** (*Progne subis*) – Breed in the Low Country. Seen on our day to Ace Basin.

**TREE SWALLOW** (*Tachycineta bicolor*) – Ace Basin NWR.

**BARN SWALLOW** (*Hirundo rustica*) – Seen on several days during our tour.

*Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)*

**CAROLINA CHICKADEE** (*Poecile carolinensis*) – Seen or heard each day of the tour.

**TUFTED TITMOUSE** (*Baeolophus bicolor*) – Ditto.

*Sittidae (Nuthatches)*

**BROWN-HEADED NUTHATCH** (*Sitta pusilla*) – These rubber duckies were seen and heard well at Francis Marion NF and again at Ace Basin.

*Troglodytidae (Wrens)*

**MARSH WREN** (*Cistothorus palustris*) – A couple of wintering (northern) birds were seen at Ace Basin. They were much warmer overall with contrasting black and rufous tones.

**MARSH WREN (EASTERN)** (*Cistothorus palustris griseus*) – This resident subspecies was seen in the marshes around the Charleston coast. It is grayer overall (and lacks the warm rufous tones) than wintering birds from the north.

**CAROLINA WREN** (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) – Seen or heard every day.

*Poliophtilidae (Gnatcatchers)*

**BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER** (*Poliophtila caerulea*) – One at a nest in the Francis Marion was neat to see.

*Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)*

**EASTERN BLUEBIRD** (*Sialia sialis*) – Most days of the tour.

**WOOD THRUSH** (*Hylocichla mustelina*) – Singing on territory along the Appalachian Trail at Preacher's Rock. Seen nicely.

**AMERICAN ROBIN** (*Turdus migratorius*) – Common breeder in the mountains of north Georgia.

*Mimidae (Mockingbirds and Thrashers)*

**GRAY CATBIRD** (*Dumetella carolinensis*) – Fairly common in the Charleston area.

**NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD** (*Mimus polyglottos*) – Very common on this tour. Seen every day.

**BROWN THRASHER** (*Toxostoma rufum*) – Heard a few times, but seen well foraging on the lawn near the Francis Beidler Forest.

*Sturnidae (Starlings)*

**EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Seen nearly every day of the tour.

*Bombycillidae (Waxwings)*

**CEDAR WAXWING** (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) – A flock of twenty was still around Charleston. They are often found downtown feeding on holly berries.

*Parulidae (New World Warblers)*

**OVENBIRD** (*Seiurus aurocapilla*) – Several on territory in the mountains of north Georgia.

**LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH** (*Parkesia motacilla*) – Nicely at Vogel and Amicalola Falls in north Georgia.

**BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER** (*Mniotilta varia*) – Seen and heard on territory in north Georgia.

**PROTHONOTARY WARBLER** (*Protonotaria citrea*) – The Swamp Canary was seen very well in the bottomland forest of Francis Marion and very close at Francis Beidler.

**KENTUCKY WARBLER** (*Geothlypis formosa*) – I was surprised to not hear more, but we had one respond very nicely as we were leaving the Francis Marion NF.

**COMMON YELLOWTHROAT** (*Geothlypis trichas*) – Seen a number of times in the coastal areas of Charleston.

**HOODED WARBLER** (*Setophaga citrina*) – Common breeding warbler in both SC and Georgia. Seen and heard nearly every day.

**AMERICAN REDSTART** (*Setophaga ruticilla*) – Along the Appalachian Trail to Preacher's Rock. One male foraging low down on the ground at the trail head was a real treat.

**NORTHERN PARULA** (*Setophaga americana*) – Very nicely several times. A common breeding warbler on this tour.

**BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER** (*Setophaga fusca*) – One female along the Appalachian Trail was a nice surprise.



**YELLOW WARBLER** (*Setophaga petechia*) – Ace Basin NWR.

**BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER** (*Setophaga caerulescens*) – One of our favorites. Birds on territory at Vogel SP, but a pair of close males at Kinnesaw Mountain was very nice.

**PINE WARBLER** (*Setophaga pinus*) – Common in the pine forests of Francis Marion and Ace Basin.

**YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE)** (*Setophaga coronata coronata*) – One was still around in the mountains of north Georgia.

**YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER** (*Setophaga dominica*) – Heard a bunch of times, but we had one in the open top of a bare tree at Ace Basin NWR.

**PRAIRIE WARBLER** (*Setophaga discolor*) – A breeding warbler seen well at Francis Marion NF.

**BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER** (*Setophaga virens*) – Seen a few times in the mountains of north Georgia.

#### Emberizidae (Buntings and New World Sparrows)

**EASTERN TOWHEE (RED-EYED)** (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus erythrophthalmus*) – The ones seen in the north Georgia area were of this subspecies.

**EASTERN TOWHEE (WHITE-EYED)** (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus rileyi*) – This coastal subspecies was seen at Francis Marion NF.

**BACHMAN'S SPARROW** (*Peucaea aestivalis*) – Yes! Endemic to the longleaf pine savannah. We had one scoped for a long time.

**CHIPPING SPARROW** (*Spizella passerina*) – A couple in the Francis Marion NF.

**SAVANNAH SPARROW** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) – This wintering sparrow was still around at Ace Basin NWR.

**SONG SPARROW** (*Melospiza melodia*) – A few singing in the mountains.

**SWAMP SPARROW** (*Melospiza georgiana*) – Another wintering sparrow that was still around at Ace Basin NWR.

#### Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

**SUMMER TANAGER** (*Piranga rubra*) – A male singing on territory at Francis Marion NF was nice to watch.

**SCARLET TANAGER** (*Piranga olivacea*) – Awesome to see this species so well in the mountains of north Georgia where it breeds.

**NORTHERN CARDINAL** (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) – A common species on this tour.

**ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK** (*Phœticus ludovicianus*) – One male singing along the Appalachian Trail was very responsive. His red chest added a splash of color against the gray sky and bare trees.

**BLUE GROSBEAK** (*Passerina caerulea*) – Seen well in the Francis Marion NF.

**INDIGO BUNTING** (*Passerina cyanea*) – This other blue beauty was seen well singing in the Francis Marion NF.

**PAINTED BUNTING** (*Passerina ciris ciris*) – The coastal subspecies (some consider it a possible split) was seen nicely at Folly Island and a few other spots. It has a different molt pattern and migratory route than the western populations.

#### Icteridae (Troupials and Allies)

**RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD** (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) – Common in the coastal areas of Charleston.

**COMMON GRACKLE** (*Quiscalus quiscula*) – Common in most places, but especially in north Georgia.

**BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE** (*Quiscalus major*) – A really cool bird despite it being a grackle. ;-) This is common in the coastal areas of Charleston. The males make a bunch of crazy sounds!

**BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD** (*Molothrus ater*) – Seen most days around Charleston.

**ORCHARD ORIOLE** (*Icterus spurius*) [\*]

#### Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

**HOUSE FINCH** (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) – Just one on Sullivan's Island.

**AMERICAN GOLDFINCH** (*Spinus tristis*) – Several nice breeding males were seen around Dahlonga.

#### Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

**HOUSE SPARROW** (*Passer domesticus*) – Every day!

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## MAMMALS

**PLAIN EASTERN CHIPMUNK** (*Tamias striatus*) – Seen (and heard) in the mountains of north Georgia.

**EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – Common throughout the tour.

**FOX SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus niger*) – One lovely dark morph individual ran across the road in front of the van when we were leaving Ace Basin NWR.

**BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN** (*Tursiops truncatus*) – A few were seen in the Charleston Harbour.

**WHITE-TAILED DEER** (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – Seen in the coastal lowlands and again in the mountains.

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## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

We had a few other interesting critters on this tour:

1) Eastern Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula*) = One unfortunately hit on the road, but still alive. A beautiful snake.

2) American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) = Two were seen at the Ace Basin NWR.

Plus a stingray at Pitt Street Bridge and Horseshoe Crabs (*Limulus polyphemus*)!

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**Totals for the tour: 144 bird taxa and 5 mammal taxa**