

Wassaw

National Wildlife Refuge



photo: David Goeke



photo: Peter Range



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Wassaw National Wildlife Refuge is a barrier island located off the Georgia Coast. The island is part of the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex which is headquartered in Savannah, Georgia. The complex includes seven national wildlife refuges, totaling 56,949 acres, found along a 100-mile stretch of coastline in Georgia and South Carolina. The seven refuges are Pinckney Island and Tybee NWRs in South Carolina; Savannah (located in both states along the Savannah River), Wassaw, Harris Neck, Blackbeard Island, and Wolf Island NWRs in Georgia.

Refuge Facts

- Established: 1969.
- Acres: 10,053 acres.
- Location: Fourteen miles southeast of Savannah, GA. The refuge is only accessible by boat.
- The refuge is bordered by the Wilmington River and Wassaw Sound on the north, the Vernon River and Ossabaw Sound on the South, and the Atlantic Ocean on the east. Salt marsh and tidal creeks separate the refuge from the mainland and Skidaway Island to the west.

Natural History

- The 10,053-acre migratory bird refuge consists of a single barrier island (Wassaw Island), tidal salt marsh, two smaller islands (collectively known as Little Wassaw Island), and several small hammocks.
- The refuge, with approximately 25 miles of boundary or shoreline, is comprised of 76% salt marsh and 24% beach dune and upland forest communities, roads, trails, and administrative land.
- Seven miles of undeveloped beach provides nesting habitat for the threatened loggerhead sea turtle. Numerous species of shorebirds visit this spectacular beach. The bald eagle nests annually on one

of the outlying hammocks and the endangered wood stork can be found feeding in the tidal marshes and waters of the refuge.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- Over 20,000 visitors annually.

Refuge Objectives

- Maintain and protect the coastal maritime forest, marsh, and beach communities.
- Provide habitat for migratory birds, wading and shorebirds, and native fauna.
- Provide habitat for endangered and threatened species, including loggerhead sea turtles, wood storks, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, and piping plovers.
- Provide wildlife education, interpretation and recreation opportunities to the visiting public.

Management Tools

- Exotic species control.
- Public hunting for deer management.
- Sea turtle nest monitoring.
- Prescribed fire.
- Education/interpretation.
- Law enforcement.

Public Use Opportunities

- Hiking/biking trails.
- Wildlife observation/ photography.
- Environmental education/ interpretation.
- Saltwater fishing.
- Sea kayaking.
- Daytime beach use.

Calendar of Events

April: Shore and songbird spring migration

May-August: Loggerhead sea turtle nesting

May-September: Caretta research project.

July-September: Loggerhead sea turtle hatchlings.

September: Shore and songbird fall migration.

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week.

November: Archery/primitive weapons deer hunt.

December: Gun hunt for deer.

Questions and Answers

How do I get out to the refuge? Is a boat available to take me?

Wassaw NWR is a barrier island that is only accessible by boat. The refuge does not provide transportation; however, charters are available from local marinas. Visitors can also access the refuge in personal watercraft.

When is the refuge open to the public?

The refuge is open year-round, from sunrise to sunset, except during the two, three-day deer hunts. No overnight use is permitted.

What can a family do on the refuge?

The refuge is managed for wildlife and to maintain the island in its natural state. The public is welcome to enjoy the beach and interior trails for hiking, bicycling, and wildlife observation. Although swimming and picnicking is permitted on the beach, open fires and pets are not allowed.

Is fishing allowed on the refuge?

The shallow, seasonal ponds in the interior of the island are closed to fishing. However, surf fishing is permitted on the beach. Saltwater fishing is popular in the refuge's many tidal creeks.

Where is the best place to access the island?

Most visitors anchor their boats off the north or south ends of the island. The refuge has a boat dock at the small headquarters office on Wassaw Creek. The public is welcome to load or unload passengers at the dock to access trails or obtain visitor information, however, due to its small size, only temporary mooring is allowed.