

Santee

National Wildlife Refuge

photo: USFWS/S. Heisey



photo: USFWS/M. Epstein



photo: USFWS/M. Epstein



photo: USFWS/S. Heisey



Marc Epstein, Refuge Manager
Santee NWR
2125 Fort Watson Road
Summerton, SC 29148
Phone: 803/478 2217
Fax: 803/478 2314
E-mail: santee@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/santee.html

Refuge Facts

- The Santee National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1941 to compensate for the loss of habitat for migratory waterfowl by the creation and flooding of the Santee Cooper Lakes.
- When established, the refuge was approved for 90,000 acres, to be leased from the South Carolina Public Service Authority for 35 years.
- Under the 1975 lease agreement, the refuge was separated into four units along the northern shore of Lake Marion totaling 8,195 acres leased from Santee Cooper. The refuge also has 4,448 acres that are owned fee title. The current lease agreement will expire in 2025.
- The refuge manages three migratory bird sanctuaries to provide a place for wintering waterfowl to rest, loaf, and feed. The largest concentrations of wintering waterfowl on the refuge are found within these sanctuaries.
- A Wilderness Study was conducted on the Plantation and Pine Islands of the refuge in 1972.
- The refuge office is located approximately seven miles south of Summerton, SC and four miles north of Santee, SC. Two of the refuge units, including the Visitor Center and Headquarters, are located within one-mile of I-95.

Natural History

- Located in the upper coastal plain region in Clarendon County, South Carolina, Santee National Wildlife Refuge is a major wintering area for migratory birds. In addition to over a dozen species of ducks, the refuge also hosts the last remaining population of migratory Canada geese in South Carolina and serves as the southerly most migration point in the Atlantic Flyway.

- Habitat types found on the refuge include mixed hardwoods, mixed pine hardwoods, pine plantations, marsh, croplands, old fields, ponds, impoundments, and open water. This tremendous diversity in habitats supports many kinds of wildlife.
- Endangered and threatened species found on the refuge include the American alligator, wood stork, and short-nosed sturgeon.
- The Dingle Pond Unit is home to a Carolina Bay, providing unique habitat for several wetland species including reptiles and amphibians. Carolina Bays are depressional wetlands typically fed by rain or spring.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- Full time employees: six
- Annual visitation: 181,000 visitors
- Primary host of the Santee Birding and Nature Festival; partners with local conservation organizations to promote ecotourism, outdoor recreation, and environmental education in central and coastal South Carolina.

Refuge Objectives

- Provide habitat for migratory waterfowl consistent with the objectives of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.
- Provide habitat and protection for neo-tropical migratory birds and endangered/threatened species.
- Provide habitat for a natural diversity of indigenous wildlife species.
- Provide opportunities for fish and wildlife-oriented recreation and environmental education.

Management Tools

- Water level management in impoundments, green-tree reservoirs, and moist soil impoundments.

- Cooperative and force account farming programs.
- Controlled burning to reduce hazardous fuels and maintain early successional habitats.
- Mechanical and chemical control of invasive species.
- Managed public hunt program for white-tailed deer and raccoon.
- Waterfowl banding.
- Refuge interpretation, education, and recreational programs.
- Law enforcement.

Calendar of Events

March

Raccoon/Opossum Hunt

April

Santee Birding and Nature Festival

September

National Public Lands Day

October

Family-Friendly Hunts; Archery and Primitive Weapons Hunts for White-tailed Deer; National Wildlife Refuge System Week

December

Santee Christmas Bird Count

Frequently Asked Questions

What types of animals can I see on the refuge?

During most times of the year there are numerous opportunities to observe a variety of wildlife species. With almost 300 species of birds recorded, Santee NWR is an outstanding area for bird watching and considered one of the best inland birding areas in South Carolina.

The brilliantly colored painted bunting nests in abundance as do a number of other neo-tropical migratory birds. During the winter months, thousands of ducks overwinter within the refuge, using the refuge-designated migratory bird sanctuaries. The refuge hosts the last remaining population of migratory Canada geese which can generally be seen feeding in the agricultural fields on the Bluff Unit. Nesting bald eagles and osprey are evident along with several other species of raptors.

Deer, turkey, and alligators are abundant and easily viewed by refuge visitors. A great variety of snake and turtle species are also common.

What is the Indian Mound?

The Santee Indian Mound/Fort Watson is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This area was a ceremonial and burial mound for the Santee Indians, which lived along the river over 1000 years ago.

In 1781, the mound was used as a platform for Fort Watson, a British outpost during the Revolutionary War which allowed the British to provide an elevated vantage point that overlooked the Santee River and the road to Charleston. Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion and Lt. Col. Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee led a campaign and overtook the fort using Maham's Tower, a tower that could be used to fire into the stockade and thus neutralize the advantage of elevation that the defenders possessed.

Are tours and/or programs available to the public?

Staff and volunteer-led programs are conducted in the fall, winter, and spring of the year. Special programs and tours for clubs, church groups, and school groups can be accommodated by contacting the refuge office.

Several special events are held throughout the year including the Santee Birding and Nature Festival, National Public Lands Day, National Wildlife Refuge System Week, and the Great Backyard Bird Count. The most up-to-date information about upcoming programs can be found on the refuge website, www.fws.gov/santee.html

When and where are the best times to see wildlife?

Generally, the best times of day to observe wildlife are shortly after dawn in the morning or shortly before dusk in the evening. Wintering waterfowl can be observed on the refuge November – February along the Wrights Bluff Nature Trail on the Bluff Unit or on the hiking/bicycling loop on the Pine Island Unit.

March through September provides the best opportunities for observing nesting neo-tropical migratory birds, such as the painted bunting, Prothonotary warbler, and indigo bunting. The Cuddo Unit Wildlife Drive and the Bluff Unit allow for easy observation of these species.

Alligators are most visible during the late fall, winter, and early spring months. On sunny days, large alligators can be seen basking on the banks of refuge canals and ditches. The best areas for observing alligators are on the Cuddo Unit Wildlife Drive and the Pine Island Unit biking/hiking trail.

Where are the public use areas on the refuge?

The Visitor Center and Refuge Office is located on the Bluff Unit of the refuge. The Visitor Center is open five days a week from 8 am – 4 pm. On the Bluff Unit, visitors may use the one-mile Wrights Bluff Nature Trail. An observation platform into Cantey Bay, and an observation tower overlooking refuge fields are great vantage points for observing a great diversity of species.

The Pine Island Unit has a 3.5 mile long biking/hiking loop and a primitive boat ramp; The Dingle Pond Unit hosts a hiking trail, observation tower, and over 600 feet of boardwalk. The Cuddo Unit public access areas include the 7.5 mile Wildlife Drive, 7.5 mile biking/hiking trails, three hiking trails, and two canoe/kayak trails. In total, the refuge has almost 40 miles of trails, two observation towers, and a visitor center open to the public.

What are the hours of operation?

The refuge is open daily from dawn until dusk with access limited on the Cuddo Unit to the following times:

October 1 – February 28: 7 am – 5 pm

March 1 – September 30: 6 am – 8 pm

The Visitor Center is open Tuesday through Saturday from 8 am – 4 pm.