

CALLAWASSIE ISLAND

Callawassie Island - nestled in the South Carolina Lowcountry- comprises about 850 acres of marsh and upland communities. For thousands of years, the Indians gathered shellfishes here. Then, nearly three centuries ago, white men arrived. They logged existing pines in the island's interior, and it is likely that many large live oaks were taken as well, to be made into ship frames; periodically the land was cultivated for corn and tomatoes. Despite these activities the island remains unspoiled.

Besides live oaks with five- and six-foot diameters and enormous canopies, there are a rare subtropical magnolia forest. These forest remnants are more than two hundred years old.

The salt marsh provides food and shelter for many animals. Most marine life is dependent on it, either directly or indirectly. Some, like shrimps, as adults live and spawn in the sea but come to the shallow waters of the tidelands to mature. Others, such as the fiddler crabs, spawn in the marshes and the young swim to sea, where they remain until nearly grown.

The male fiddlers are easily identified by their single large claws responsible for the animals' name. So abundant are these crabs, that they may frequently be seen by thousands, scuttling over the sand or peering from holes in the beach or the mud flats. The holes, thickly scattered over wide areas, lead to burrows a foot or more deep. In summer, the crab's mating season, the males wave their colorful superlimbs to attract females, besides using them for defense and attack.

Marshgrasses stalks are perfect haunts for periwinkles, small snails of the sea coast. Periwinkles and, more so, oysters were part of the diet of the ancient Indian tribes who lived along the Atlantic.

Piles of oyster shells, reminders of the Indians' feasts, dot Callawassie Island. Archeologists don't know whether these shell mounds, or middens, were used as refuse heaps, burial grounds, or ceremonial sites - possibly some served for all three functions.

Later settlers combined shells from the middens with lime and sand to make building materials. The houses they constructed are called tabbies, after a Wolof word describing houses in Senegal built of a similar material.

Birds, by their nature, are the most apparent fauna anywhere, and Callawassie Island is no exception. The marsh is an important way station for many waterbird species.

Elegant, gregarious white ibises nest and raise their young in the marshhummock rookery. Hérons and egrets, so stately whether in flight or standing at the water's edge waiting for fishes, visit the island in fair numbers through the year. Loons, the great Northern divers, overwinter at Callawassie. And cormorants, who perch spread-eagle on pilings to dry their wings are present year/round. Alongside are brown pelicans, whose pouches can hold more fishes than their bellies can and whose population is on the upswing after decimation by DDT. At any given time a number of gulls, terns, and sandpipers may be migrating through, wintering, or ~~nesting here.~~ ^{remaining to nest.}

In the days when ospreys were numerous, they nested on the island. Today, their population drastically declined, they are seen only occasionally. It's a lucky visitor who catches sight of an osprey plunging, feet first, into the water to snatch a fish. And, keeping your eyes skyward, you may chance ~~to~~ glimpse a soaring vulture ^{circling} in search of a meal.

At first glance the salt marsh may seem dull, almost lifeless, because only the grasses are immediately visible. Actually there is a multitude of green plants when one considers the great variety of other vascular plants and algae that live in and blanket the marsh water. Tidal marsh soil is the most fertile and productive soil on Earth. Providing food and shelter for a diversity of life forms, it is important to all living things.

Cordgrass grows tall and thick along the tidal creeks, but thin and short inland on the marsh plains, where it is joined by other salt-tolerant plants, such as needlegrass, rush, glasswort and sea ox-eye.

All these plants must cope with the constant flow of the tides and with salt, as must all other life in the edge of the island, to a lesser degree.

Where the marsh meets the forest, red cedar, Spanish bayonet, wax myrtle, palmetto, and yaupon holly intermingle, a transition zone leading to upland forests.

There is a saying that a live oak tree takes a hundred years to grow, lives for a hundred years, and takes another hundred to die. The tree is massive and beautiful, with a crown usually much wider than the tree is tall. Unlike northern varieties of oak, which have lobed leaves and are bald in winter, the live oak's leaves are small and egg-shaped. These tough, shiny leaves remain for ever green - thus the tree's name. In spring, the older leaves drop, sounding like rain as they crisply tick down.

Dust and leaf mold accumulate in the rough, deeply grooved bark of the live oaks, making fertile territories for seeds blown into their branches. Many of the trees' lower branches are covered with resurrection fern. Even small trees, particularly oaks and palmettos, grow in ~~the~~ forks of live oak^{branches}. The live oak's acorns are small, and ~~they~~ are sweet and tasty when roasted. Indians rendered a sweet oil from them for cooking.

Most special on Callawassie Island is the evergreen subtropical magnolia forest, along the southeastern shore. It is the only remaining community of its type documented in South Carolina. Standing on a shell midden that is about three feet deep, the forest has taken several centuries to grow to its present state. And all efforts shall be made to preserve it.

The magnolia's flowers are tulip-shaped and larger than two hands held together. Their life is brief, just one day, but in that moment they exude an overwhelming perfume. Botanists believe magnolias to be one of the most primitive of flowering plants.

Sassafras occurs throughout. In autumn their yellow, orange, and red foliage stands out brightly among the surrounding evergreens. When chewed, sassafras roots taste like root beer. At one time they were used to make a tonic.

Yaupon holly, or Christmas berry, is found on the island. The twigs of the evergreen shrub, with their tiny leaves and numerous red berries, are favorite Christmas decorations.

The South Carolina state flower, yellow jessamine, or Carolina jasmine (not a true jasmine), grows here. One of the earliest spring flowers, this vine occurs only in North America, east of the Mississippi, and has no close relatives on any other continent. Its golden blossoms are deliciously scented, and its evergreen willowlike leaves ramble over bushes and low shrubs.

No picture of the Deep South would be complete without Spanish moss. Its gray green strands hang from the branches of nearly any tree, but mostly oaks.

Neither a moss, nor Spanish, nor a parasite sapping life from the tree, it is an epiphyte, an air plant that draws from the atmosphere the moisture and other substances it needs. Sometimes Spanish moss grows so exuberantly and rapidly that it deprives its host of air and light, thereby killing the tree. It is hard to believe that this strange plant with tiny blossoms resembling forget-me-nots belongs to the pineapple family.