

SOUTHEASTERN NORTH CAROLINA HOTSPOTS
Barrier Islands, Pine Savannahs, and the Cape Fear River

December 13-18, 2020

Itinerary

Day 1: Sun, Dec 13 – Pee Dee NWR; Wrightsville Beach

We depart Asheville early in the morning for the coast, stopping at the excellent Pee Dee NWR in Anson & Richmond Counties in central NC on our way. Comprising over 8,400 acres of agricultural fields, forests, and waterfowl impoundments along the Pee Dee River, the refuge is an important stopover area for migratory birds and is a winter haven for thousands of waterfowl. **Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon, and Gadwall** are just a few of the many ducks we should see, and the refuge is also a good spot for **Brown-headed Nuthatch** and **Northern Bobwhite**. After lunch, we continue to Wrightsville Beach and check into our hotel. After settling in, we visit the southern end of island, Masonboro Inlet. Here we should find many of the typical winter residents of the Atlantic coastline, such as **Ruddy Turnstone, American Oystercatcher, and Forster's Tern**, in addition to many others. Upon the jetty walls we hope to see both **Great Cormorant** and **Purple Sandpiper**, while **Black & Surf Scoters** and **Red-breasted Merganser** can be found swimming in the inlet. This site has been great for rarities through the years – **Harlequin Duck, Eared Grebe**, and even **Burrowing Owl** have been seen here, so who knows what else we may stumble upon! *Night in Wrightsville Beach*

Day 2: Mon, Dec 14 - Wrightsville Beach & Airlie Gardens

Our morning begins with a sunrise visit to Johnnie Mercer's Pier. **Common Loons** begin to gather here just offshore at this time of year and occasionally number as many as four or five hundred birds! **Red-throated Loon** and **Horned Grebe** should also be present and we should see **Northern Gannets** diving for fish offshore. We'll have more chances for scoters and we will likely see several southbound flocks and any number of shorebirds could be perched on the pier or on the beach below. The rest of our morning will be spent birding our way from one end of the island to the other, looking for **Piping Plover, Red Knot, and Seaside Sparrow** among more common species like **Northern Harrier, Sandwich Tern, Horned Grebe** and more. In the afternoon, we head to Airlie Gardens, a century-old estate encompassing 67 acres of landscaped gardens, majestic live oaks, and walking paths along a tidal creek just a few minutes from Wrightsville Beach. **Red-headed Woodpecker** is common here and we'll look for winter warbler flocks which could contain **Black-and-white** or **Yellow-throated Warblers**. A 10-acre freshwater lake often holds a good variety of waterfowl including **Hooded Merganser, Green-winged Teal, and American Black Duck**. *Night in Wrightsville Beach*

Day 3: Tue, Dec 15 – Carolina Beach & Fort Fisher

Today we head 45 min south to Carolina Beach and Fort Fisher, located in southern New Hanover County. Wedged between the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean, this thin strip of land provides an excellent variety of habitats for birds year round, from long-leaf pine savannah to riverine and maritime forests, coastal scrub thickets, salt marshes, and beach. Our main targets today will be all 3 of the coastal marsh sparrows (**Seaside, Saltmarsh, and Nelson's**), **Marsh & Sedge Wrens, Loggerhead Shrike, Common Goldeneye** and a number of shorebirds including **Marbled Godwit, Short-billed Dowitcher, Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin, and Western Sandpiper** to name a few. In the evergreen scrub we will search the hordes of **Palm** and **Yellow-rumped Warblers** for **Orange-crowned** and other overwintering warblers (like **Prairie**), and anything else we can find. This area has also had its fair share of rarities show

up in fall and winter, from **Clay-colored Sparrow** and **White-winged Dove** to **Western Kingbird** and **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher**. *Night in Wrightsville Beach*

Day 4: Wed, Dec 16 – Holly Shelter Game Lands; Pender & Onslow Co. Hotspots

Today we explore the excellent pine savannah and unique pocosin wetlands of Holly Shelter Gamelands. This habitat once covered much of North Carolina and indeed the southeastern US, and while most of it is now gone, Holly Shelter remains a stronghold for the habitat with over 10,000 acres managed within its borders. A 16-mile dirt road takes us through prime habitat for the federally-endangered **Red-cockaded Woodpecker**, and an early start will give us the best chance at seeing them. This habitat is also home to such denizens as **Brown-headed Nuthatch**, **Pine Warbler**, and **Bachman's Sparrow**, though it can be a challenge to find the latter at this time of year! **Henslow's** and **Grasshopper Sparrows** winter in the savannahs as well, and occasionally they can be heard singing, but hearing or seeing them is never guaranteed! It's also an excellent place to find **Northern Bobwhite**, **Rusty Blackbird**, and **Red-headed Woodpecker**, among many others. The rest of our day will be spent birding at other sites around Pender & Onslow Counties, including Topsail and North Topsail Beaches. Here we have a good chance for both **Lesser Black-backed** and **Great Black-backed Gulls**, among any number of shorebirds. *Night in Wrightsville Beach*

Day 5: Thr, Dec 17 – Sunset Beach; Brunswick Co. Hotspots

This morning we make our way south to Sunset Beach Island in Brunswick County, just north of the SC state line. This is the best spot in the state to look for **Wood Stork** and we will visit a well-known roost site which also holds good numbers of **Black-crowned Night-Herons**, **White Ibis**, and **Snowy Egrets**. We have further chances for **Loggerhead Shrike** and all three coastal sparrows in the area and occasionally **Roseate Spoonbills** overwinter in the area as well! After a full morning of birding Sunset Beach we visit other spots within Brunswick County. We will look for **Wood Duck** and other waterfowl at Orton Pond, and winter sparrows, woodpeckers, and other songbirds at several nearby parks along the Brunswick & Cape Fear Rivers. *Night in Wrightsville Beach*

Day 6: Fri, Dec 18 – Greenfield Lake; Lake Waccamaw State Park

After breakfast and an early check out, we make a quick visit to the USS North Carolina Battleship Memorial to listen for rails before sunrise. **King**, **Virginia** and **Sora** are all possible here! We then spend some time birding at nearby Greenfield Lake, a historic millpond that has been allowed to grow into a mature cypress lake. Encompassing over 250 acres, it is a fantastic spot for winter waterfowl and **Anhinga** is found here year-round. Straggling and over-wintering warblers and other neotropical migrants are regularly found here in November, including **Cape May Warbler**, **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher**, and **Blue-headed Vireo**. Leaving Wilmington behind, our last stop of the trip will be 40 minutes west at Lake Waccamaw, a large 'Carolina Bay,' one of several hundred shallow, elliptical basins scattered along the Atlantic coastline. Covering over 9,000 acres in Columbus County, the lake is rich in biodiversity and is home to a host of endemic fish & mollusks, plus Black Bear, American Alligator, and several rare plants. The rest of our morning will be spent exploring the state park's trails and boardwalk on the southeastern shore, where we should encounter a good mix of waterfowl, woodpeckers, and songbirds. After a final lunch, we return to Asheville, arriving by dinner time.