

By Tom Poland

***The only way to discover some of the state's finest natural treasures is to exit the "I," slow down and go. . . .***



# ***Down Low Country Way***

A flash of white drops into the river to your left, then climbs. The diving flash—a bald eagle!—now clutches a fish in its talons. But a dieseling 18-wheeler is charging into your rearview mirror, and the rare moment vanishes in a lane shift. The eagle, says legend, is the only animal that can look into the sun, but you'll never verify it while driving 75 miles per hour. Nor will you smell tidal backwaters and swamp dogwood, or watch endangered wood storks feed on mudflats. Racing along the interstate, you can't even *think* about what waits beyond the exit.

Maybe it's time to slow down. Maybe it's time to *GO* down . . . down Low Country way. You know—take that poetic “road less traveled.” Two different roads, indeed, remind us Frost was right. One, Highway 64, leads to Walterboro where an ancient lane cuts a green leafy tunnel through a swamp. President George Washington traveled it when it was the Old Charleston to Savannah Stagecoach Road. At best, he made 33 miles a day that spring of 1791. You can bet he saw plenty of wildlife.

The other road, I-95 (isn't that a bingo card space?), lets you rip off 33 miles in 25 minutes. And why not? About all you'll see, though, are concrete, billboards, 18-wheelers and other speedsters.

There's a difference between driving and traveling. Washington *traveled*. (Well, he had no

choice.) Charles Kuralt traveled. Heed his words: “The interstate highway system is a wonderful thing. It makes it possible to go from coast to coast without seeing anything or meeting anybody. If the United States [substitute ‘Low Country’] interests you, stay off the interstates.”

**T**he next time you head south on I-95, explore Exits 53 and 57 near Walterboro, Exit 38 at Yemassee, Exit 33 to the Low Country Visitors Center and other departure points within the ACE Basin. Let the Low Country cast its spell.

You'll discover a wonderful sense of place. Drive coastward past haunted, green swamps and oaks dripping with Spanish moss into the land of black water and white sand, ever slanting toward the continent's edge. Discover culture, geography, language, tranquility and wilderness. Ruins, canoe trails, Gullah's intonations, history, heritage, wildlife, plants, antiques, islands and salt marsh. You'll find that and more in this sea-level garden where magnificent landscapes rule. There's plenty to do and lots to see. The journey *is* your destination.

There's something deeply moving about swamps, wetlands and refuges. Alien and beautiful, they testify to nature's resilience. Consider the Great Swamp Sanctuary, where 800 acres of braided-creek bottomland form the shimmering



PHOTO BY ROBERT CLARK

*An oak-canopied lane, a blithely immersed coot and a shirmp net hurled into twilight waters are but a sampling of the Low Country images that await you if you're willing to take the "road less traveled."*



PHOTO BY LYNNE BRANHAM

green heart of Walterboro. Just three minutes off I-95, a town, of all places, provides a tranquil setting to contemplate southern swamps. Stroll the boardwalk stretching over more than two miles of swamp. See the Old Charleston to Savannah Stagecoach Road where its bridges, washed into oblivion, still throw up bulkheads through the black waters. George Washington gazed out a stagecoach window here, hoping, he said, "to acquire knowledge of the face of the country."

That face has changed, but Washington still would appreciate the East Coast's largest estuarine preserve (134,710 acres), the pristine ACE Basin. The Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto rivers sustain

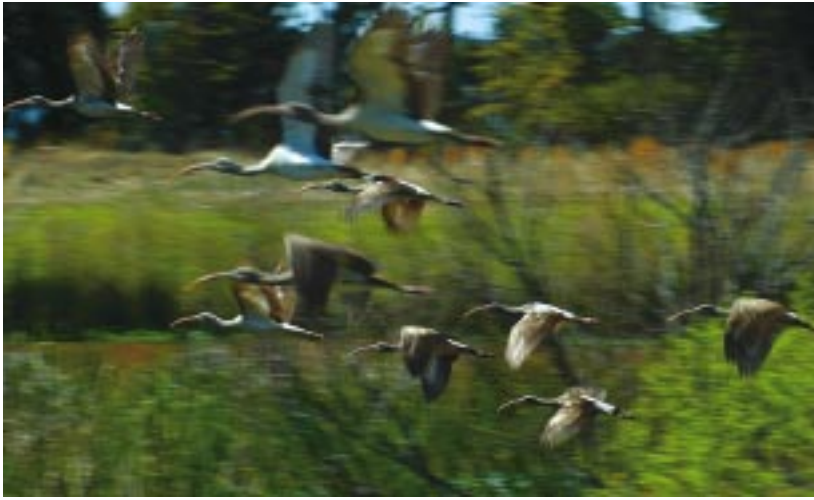
the basin, covering parts of Colleton, Charleston, Beaufort and Hampton counties. The rivers twist past cypress swamps, historic plantations, old rice fields and tidal marshes. The scenery is picturesque—the South of old. And here in the land of buttressed trees and cypress knees you might discover if the bald eagle really does stare into the sun.

Off Exit 21, the Blue Heron Nature Trail in Ridgeland will teach you something about native wildlife and plants. With sunning alligators and anhingas, educational displays, a boardwalk and a nature center, it's a good stop for kids. They can feed fish, turtles and ducks and visit the butterfly garden (shaped like a butterfly) where flights of fancy rule the day.

**T**ravel on, and soon you come to the great sanctuaries. Jasper County can't hold the expansive Savannah National Wildlife Refuge (29,175 acres), which spills into Georgia north of Savannah. The refuge, on the Atlantic Flyway, hosts thousands of mallards, pintails, teal and other duck species during winter. Songbirds sojourn here on their flight to and from northern nesting grounds. The area hums with life year-round as freshwater marshes, tidal rivers, creeks and bottomland fashion a mosaic of quintessential Low Country habitat. The earth melts into water,



PHOTO BY JANICE SAULS



*Egrets (facing page) and ducks rising from a pond are common Low Country scenes. Right: A rice field gate recalls a bygone era.*



and a prairie of rippling green grass gives form to the wind. Estuaries glint beneath a sun raining a miracle called photosynthesis.

Land, water and marsh, all in juxtaposition. The “edge” effect sets up nicely for wildlife. One acre of cord grass supports 1 million fiddler crabs. And that is just one species in this staggeringly rich environment where sun, saltwater, chlorophyll and decay produce a rich broth that anchors the sea’s food chain—detritus. The interplay of sunlight, minerals and water sustains priceless communities of life—biomes, as the biologists say.

The Savannah National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1927, merits respect not just for the reasons above but because it’s a graveyard of sorts. Ghosts from the rice industry linger here . . . levee remains, remnants of slave quarters, old mill sites and small cemeteries. Slaves cleared riverside swamps of timber and undergrowth, erected earthen levees and built an intricate system of dams, dikes, floodgates, ditches and drains. And then the moon went to work, raising and lowering the tides that irrigated fields, encouraging the growth of rice and drowning weeds and pests.

It was a short run. Hurricanes and the Civil War doomed the rice culture. Wild rice lives on, however, and the refuge clamors during migratory periods when 21 species of warblers and thousands of ducks, including the rarely seen cinnamon teal, descend. Moving in great flotillas, they dive and dabble, unlike the great blue heron stalking the shallows step by step.

The wildlife refuge bursts with beauty, diversity, natural history and man’s history. But cruising I-95 reveals none of it. As Jim Wescott, director of the Lowcountry & Resort Island Tourism Commission, points out, “A lot of people don’t realize

what beauty and wilderness they’re whizzing by at 70 miles per hour.”

Off Highway 278 near Hilton Head, a more modest sanctuary waits: Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge (4,053 acres). Namesake Pinckney Island is the largest and only island open to public use. Most of the refuge (67 percent, to be precise) consists of salt marsh and tidal creeks. Hummocks abound. Greenery, blue water, blue sky, chocolate pluff mud and flecks of white against spartina compose a land of sublime earth hues.

The flecks of white, of course, are ibis, herons and egrets. You needn’t be a birder to appreciate avian life. The refuge harbors wading bird rookeries, osprey nests and the wood stork. Low tide’s mudflats become breadbaskets for herons, egrets, ibis, willets, terns, sandpipers and oystercatchers.

Of course, all this natural wealth proved tantalizing long ago. Explore Pinckney’s 14 miles of hiking and bicycling trails and you follow native Americans who dwelled here as early as 10,000 B.C. Behold, as they did, vistas of broad salt marshes, forests and freshwater ponds.

Mackey’s Creek, the Chechessee River, Port Royal Sound and Skull Creek merge here, and all that water sustains some of the most exciting salt marsh habitat in the coastal zone. Not surprisingly, studying, viewing and photographing the island’s wildlife and marshscapes are popular throughout the year.

**T**hey’re as inseparable as shrimp and grits—Thumans and the Low Country. Visit the Hampton Museum and Visitors Center (HMVC) for a perspective on people and nature. A brick building erected in 1892 by the Bank of Hampton houses the museum. Marie S. Ellis is the curator.

# An Essential Low Country Itinerary

**The Great Swamp Sanctuary.** Take Exit 53 off I-95 and travel east two miles. Call (843) 549-2545.

**Hampton Museum and Visitors Center,** 99 E. Elm St., Hampton. Call (803) 943-5318 or (803) 943-2444.

**Blue Heron Nature Trail and Learning Center.** Exit 21, I-95 and Highway 336 in Ridgeland.

**Lake Warren State Park.** From Hampton, travel Highway 601 south five miles; turn right onto Lake Warren Road; drive one mile; park entrance is on the left.

**The Lowcountry Visitors Center & Museum.** I-95 Exit 33 at Point South.

**Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge.** U.S. 278, 18 miles east of Hardeeville, half a mile of Hilton Head Island.

**Savannah National Wildlife Refuge.** The Laurel Hill Wildlife Drive is on SC 170, six miles south of Hardeeville via US 17 (Exit 5 off I-95).

You can start with the 5,000 photos. Ellis reels off the subjects. "Our photos cover areas such as architecture, businesses, civic and other clubs, education, government and politics, military, natural history, special events, sports and the Watermelon Festival." Most photos are from the 1940s to the present.

You'll also find military artifacts, antique medical equipment, memorabilia from the Watermelon Festival, and wares of local craftsmen and artisans. Learn about native Americans and the early Post Office. You'll find an unusual company doll collection that represents a variety of long-famous brand names.

"Our gift shop is very small," Ellis says, "about two feet by four feet by one-and-a-half feet." On sale are booklets about Hampton County; local, hand-made souvenirs; church dolls; porcelain Christmas ornaments; and illustrated HMVC stationery.

For many years people tried to open the museum's old safe. None succeeded. Then Thomas E. Finch, a retired government locksmith from Clearwater, Florida, overheard a conversation about the safe in a Santee restaurant. "He called to offer his services in 2005," said Marie. "We accepted his offer and after 14 hours the safe was open."

A \$500 money wrapper and a white ring box, empty, were all they found. But there's another mystery: the secret compartment a visitor found in a cash register, and what was inside it. Curious? Go down Low Country way and talk to Ellis.

"My Lady's Room" contains antique beauty salon gadgets and a "swooning couch." Upstairs is an exhibit of the *USS Hampton*, a nuclear-powered submarine whose first commander started a tradition of Navy participation in the Watermelon Festival.

While you're in the Hampton vicinity, check out Lake Warren State Park, a 422-acre park surrounding 200-acre Lake Warren. The park's flood plain for-

est supports large trees and four pine species. A three-acre lake is home to largemouth bass, bream, redbreast, crappie and catfish.

Just a ways down I-95, at Exit 33, you'll find the Lowcountry Visitor's Center at Point South in the Frampton House (1868). History is deep here. The magnificent oaks bordering the building were more than 100 years old when Lee's troops built the earthworks there to defend the Savannah-to-Charleston railroad line. Sherman's torch passed through, destroying the original plantation house. Behind the center, a gazebo reflecting 18th-Century architecture stands at the trailhead of the Revolutionary War Trail.

You'll find exhibitions from other Low Country museums, Walterboro's South Carolina Artisans Center, and a display about major movies filmed in the Lowcountry. *Radio*, *The Prince of Tides*, *Forrest Gump* and *The Patriot*, among others, share Low Country connections. The region seduces the camera, drawing producers of minor films, as well.

One torrid August afternoon long ago, working near the Combahee River, shooting *Blackwater Rivers*, I trained an Arriflex BL on a bald eagle. The eagle soared upward, riding a thermal. Intent on prey, it never looked into the sun. It can't. Only the blind can.

Forsake I-95. Discover the joys of traveling the Low Country. Explore the great plain that once lay beneath an ancient ocean. Go down where the surf foams and flirts with your feet. Tread the grainy remnants of ancient mountains, borne seaward for eons by rivers. Let the journey be the destination. ❖

THIS ARTICLE IS SPONSORED BY:

- \* Hampton Museum & Visitors Center, Hampton
- \* Jasper County Chamber of Commerce
- \* Lowcountry & Resort Islands Tourism Commission, Yemassee

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