

# SEA ISLAND LIFE

FALL/WINTER 2022/23

EXPLORE THE DUNES, SALT MARSHES  
AND MARITIME FORESTS OF THE

*Georgia  
Coast*

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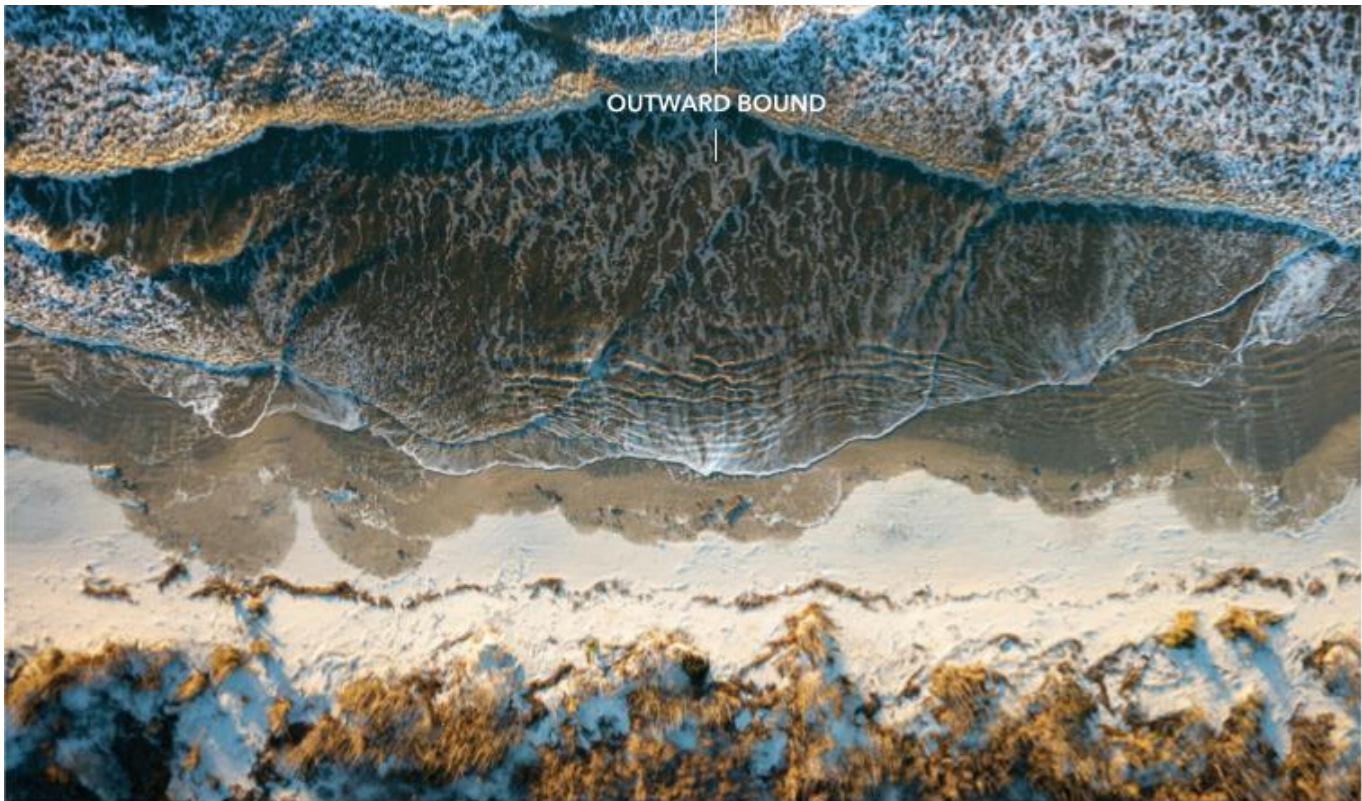
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# The Dunes, Maritime Forests and Salt Marshes of Georgia's Coast

ON BARRIER ISLANDS, EVEN A FEW INCHES OF ELEVATION CHANGE  
LEAD TO VASTLY DIFFERENT NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS.

| BY JOE RADA |

**T**en feet. That's the highest elevation found on Sea Island. But what a difference a tiny topographical change makes to plants and animals inhabiting natural areas as diverse as dunes, marshes and maritime forests.

"These unique ecosystems wrap around each other like jigsaw puzzle pieces," says Sea Island Lead Naturalist Haley Watkins. "Each area is fascinating. Together they're truly amazing and even a slight rise in elevation can change everything."

Georgia's barrier islands are teeming with dynamic and interconnected ecosystems influenced by tides, waves and currents. Sands from ocean-facing shores gradually migrate and accumulate in salt marshes, while nutrient-rich floating marsh plants move the opposite direction and accumulate on beaches; each feeding the other. These intertwined microcosms attract a wide variety of wildlife that feeds on, nests in, migrates through or otherwise inhabits coastal settings.

## **SAND DUNES**

"Georgia's gently sloped beaches can extend as far as a quarter mile out at low tide," Watkins notes. "They're great for watching shorebirds, exploring tidepools, seeing tiny coquina clams burrow and horseshoe crabs gather."

Clusters of sculpted beachside dunes are home to sparse but hardy desert-like flora, chief among them are sea oats whose reedy stalks sway in the breeze. Known as pioneer plants because they establish first, sea oats trap blown sand and extend long roots, habits that help stabilize dunes. "Sea oats turn bright golden-amber in fall, which is partly how The Golden Isles got its name," Watkins states.

Dunes harbor a variety of specially adapted plants like saw palmetto, prickly pear cactus, yucca, morning glory and sea oxeye daisies. All of which have thick, waxy or furry leaves that are able to conserve moisture and withstand sea spray.





AMPHIBIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

In turn, they attract small animals such as ghost crabs, tiger beetles, grasshoppers, rabbits and birds, including nesting least terns whose eggs incubate in sun-warmed sand.

#### MARITIME FORESTS

Maritime forests are thick pockets of hardwoods, pines, shrubs and vines growing on inches-higher ground wedged between marshes and dunes.

Towering live oak, water oak, southern magnolia, yellow poplar, loblolly pine, red maple, tupelo and pignut hickory trees create a canopy of shade for an understory of red bay, yaupon, American holly, sparkleberry, wax myrtle, saw palmetto and Spanish moss. These thick forests bordering marshes and dunes provide ideal habitat for mammals, reptiles and birds, from white-tailed deer to grey squirrels, wild turkeys, tree frogs, lizards and songbirds.



#### SALT MARSHES

An estimated half-million acres of shallow salt marshes spread between barrier islands and the mainland on Georgia's 100-mile coast. These unique wetlands have high concentrations of salt, tides that rise and fall more than 8 feet, and currents that relocate sediments.

Known for its network of small creeks, marshes sprout vast swaths of spartina, commonly known as cordgrass, growing three feet tall. Similar to sea oats on dunes, cordgrass spreads matted roots that hold the marsh in place and provide food for fiddler crabs, oysters, mussels, bristle worms, snails and many fish and bird species.

Although not home to an abundance of permanent residents, marshes attract plenty of land and aquatic species that visit to feed and shelter. "Marshes are at least temporarily home to young shrimp, blue crabs and various fish before they move to open sea," Watkins comments. "Even dolphins feed where water is deep enough."

On guided nature outings, beaches and dunes are where guests feel most familiar, maritime forests seem different yet recognizable as woodlands, but marshes, Watkins says, "that's where eyes light up because marshland is so unfamiliar to many and so beautiful. Every ecological zone is unique, but salt marshes really make barrier islands special."