

## Reptiles and amphibians (and other wildlife) of South Carolina and north Georgia, USA

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This profusely illustrated talk covered the reptiles and amphibians of two areas in the southern United States of America, together with birds, mammals, invertebrates and flowers seen on springtime family holidays.

### South Carolina

South Carolina is a warm weather area on the east coast of the USA. It is largely flat and low-lying and very marshy with lots of rivers and lakes. It has a mix of northern and southern species and a large number of different species. It is relatively warm in spring and has holiday resorts on the coast for those in the family who are not dedicated to reptiles.

Compared to the UK's 3 snakes, 3 lizards, 3 frogs, 2 toads and 3 newts, South Carolina has 39 snakes, 12 lizards, 16 tortoises and terrapins (+ 5 marine turtles), 1 alligator, 31 frogs and toads and 35 salamanders and newts.

The holiday was based at **Hilton Head Island**, a sand-spit island at the southern end of the South Carolina coast linked to the mainland by a causeway. The island is very marshy with lots of lakes, including one just outside the time-share apartment. The first alligator seen was on this lake, which also had abundant yellow-bellied sliders (terrapins). A 10-12 feet long alligator was on the golf course nearby. It is worth noting that it is an offence to feed or harass alligators. Other species seen around here included fishing or raft spiders, dragonflies (*Dolomedes sp.*), great blue heron, snake-neck or anhinga, osprey, tri-coloured heron, black-crowned night heron, tufted titmouse and a flock of cormorants. A green anole lizard was seen in the wall beneath the apartment.

A male southern toad was seen in the local shopping mall and a green anole displaying with its dewlap on the roof of a shop. The local beach had sand dunes behind and a disorientated baby terrapin was seen making its way towards the sea. On the golf course, they were shown an alligator den under the bank of the lake for winter hibernation. Birds seen included brown pelicans, northern cardinal, eastern blue bird, little blue heron, pied billed grebe, red-bellied woodpecker, brown thrasher, northern mocking bird, great egret, white-throated sparrow, yellow-rumped warbler, brown-headed cowbirds, blue jay and grackle. A south-eastern 5-lined skink was seen hiding in the leaf litter, presumably to escape cats, which predate them, though the cat almost comes off worst as they are toxic to them. Spanish moss was abundant on trees.

On the way to the **Tilman Sands Heritage Preserve**, a black vulture was seen circling over Walmart and there was a boat-tailed grackle in the car park. The reserve includes swamp cypress with its breathing roots. A Carolina wren nest was found in an old tyre and there were zebra-tailed swallowtail butterflies and locusts. Dwarf salamanders, which have no lungs and just use the mouth and skin for respiration were found, as well as eastern fence lizard and ground skink.

The **Gopher Tortoise Reserve** is a dry area with very sandy soil. The gopher tortoise digs long tunnels up to 40 feet down, which are used by many other animals as refuges. In the harbour were laughing gulls, brown pelicans and a double-crested cormorant. A dolphin-watching trip out to sea was successful.

At the **Sea Pines Nature Reserve**, a green tree frog and a southern leopard frog were seen as well as a ribbon snake eating a small frog. Other species included red-bellied woodpecker, white ibis, grey catbird and grey squirrel (in its natural habitat). The **Sugar Cane Reserve** had numerous

mosquito fish, a common snapping turtle, a banded water snake, squirrel tree frog and a juvenile cottonmouth (water moccasin). ~There were ant lion pits in the car park.

## **Northern Georgia**

This holiday was at **Big Canoe**, Georgia, a gated community for residents and visitors on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains in hilly mountainous terrain, a very different habitat from that on Hilton Head Island. As a result the species were different, with 12 frogs, 22 snakes, 8 lizards, 21 salamanders and 5 toads recorded on the species list.

Birds seen included pileated woodpecker, red-headed woodpecker, Carolina wren (inside the apartment), chipping sparrow, tufted titmouse, American goldfinch, killdeer (a type of plover), eastern bluebird, vulture, wild turkey and Canada geese (in their natural environment). Mammals included Virginia opossum, common raccoon and white-tailed deer and there were cockchafer beetles, a skipper butterfly, tent caterpillars and monarch butterfly as well as sapsucker damage to trees. Fresh road-kill seen comprised a garter snake which had just regurgitated its lunch of red salamander. A 5-lined skink or south-eastern 5-lined skink was seen as well as a 3-lined salamander and a black-bellied salamander. In some of the lakes, trout have been introduced for anglers after killing off the native fish and this has tended to reduce the population of salamanders.

At the **Amicolola Falls Park** there was a reptile display in the information centre, which included eastern box turtle, copperhead (a pit viper), timber rattlesnake, eastern garter snake, corn snake and northern water snake. In the park they saw tiger beetles, eastern tiger swallowtail and black swallowtail butterflies, eastern fence lizard, 5-lined skink, bullfrog and bullfrog tadpoles and a groundhog or woodchuck. Birds included Blackburnian warbler, cedar waxwings, tree swallow, eastern bluebird, killdeer, broad-winged hawk and mourning dove. Climbing up alongside the waterfall it was surprising to see a northern water snake on the rocks well away from the water, which turned out to be hunting Ocoee salamanders on the edge of the waterfall. There was also a southern ring-necked snake.

The **Dahlonega gold mine** is now owned by the state as a tourist attraction and it was still early enough in the year for there to be bats hibernating inside.

At **Toad's Pond** there was a stump which had been taken down by beavers and green frog tadpoles, northern cricket frog, spring peeper (a tree frog) northern banded water snake and black racer snake. Birds included northern flicker (a woodpecker), downy woodpecker, Carolina wood duck, greylag and Canada geese and turkey vultures.