

SCANNING LAKE MARION FOR BIRDS FROM A PERCH IN SANTEE STATE PARK, SC

SOUTH CAROLINA

Country Fried Hike

A NEW 420-MILE TRAIL PROMISES ADVENTURES FULL OF ALLIGATORS, REVOLUTIONARY WAR GHOSTS, AND SWEET-AS-MOLASSES HOSPITALITY.

On the grassy shores of Lake Marion, fishermen peel off their thigh-high waders and show off the day's catch. On a half-submerged log, four painted turtles are lined up like old men on a porch. The warm air is thick with the clean, sweet smell of pine trees and honeysuckle. The day couldn't be more peaceful...except for a silver-haired man in the distance waving his fist furiously in the air.

We drop our packs and wander closer to see who or what he's gesturing at. There, out on the lake, perched on a rickety dock that sways with the wind, is a great blue heron. In the man's fist is a silver fish, still alive and flapping. Slowly the heron creeps closer to the shore, its slate-blue wings unfurling slightly for balance. When the bird reaches the near end of the dock, it takes flight. The man launches the fish, and the heron catches it in its chisel-like bill just inches above the ground.

The man turns to face us, beaming. "Did y'all see that?" he calls, then explains that the same heron visits this cove every night. Sometimes she takes the fish. Sometimes she doesn't.

The human birdfeeder is the first of many surprises we discover along the South's newest long trail. Dripping with wildlife and down-home hospitality, South Carolina's Palmetto Trail reveals a different wildland flavor around every corner. Coastal marshes give way to rare longleaf pine

forests and misty cypress-filled swamps, undeveloped lakeshores, rolling sandhills, and rocky ridgelines. Occasionally, the trail makes front-country forays past abandoned pecan plantations, dusty trailside Coca-Cola stands, and remote Revolutionary War sites. When complete, the path will stretch 420 miles from the Atlantic Coast to the Blue Ridge Mountains. For now, my friends and I will be the first five backpackers to set foot on the 25-mile Lake Marion section, about 60 miles from the coast. We'll head north, about 50 total miles.

The silver-haired man introduces himself as Stanley, owner of Jack's Creek campground. With the same generosity extended to the heron, he offers us his best tent sites and the use of his small fishing boat.

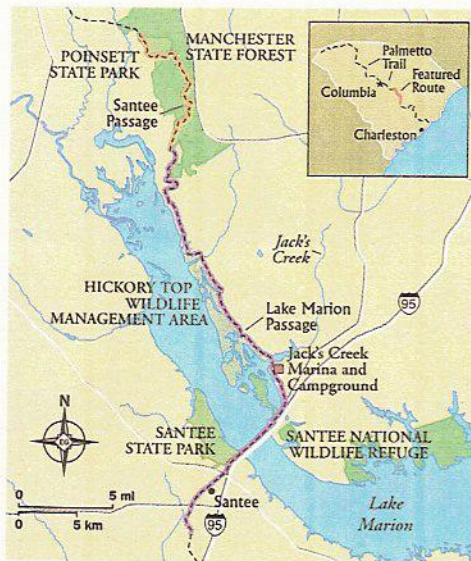
As we guide our borrowed boat out onto the lake, we dodge a graveyard of uprooted trees and exposed stumps, reminders of 1989's Hurricane Hugo. Above, osprey whistle warning calls from nests balanced atop 30-foot snags.

The cypress forest is so thick in one cove that we need the agility of a kayak to avoid the swollen trunks. We duck beneath veils of Spanish moss; it's so dark, we wouldn't know if a gator were floating 3 feet away.

The cool breeze off the lake is a welcome reprieve from our steamy day of hiking. The first few miles of trail took us over Lake Marion on an abandoned two-lane bridge, where heat radiated so intensely from the fractured concrete that Jessica held her sleeping pad above us for shade. Fortunately, the views were equally intense: To our left, blue waters and green marshes stretched north as far as we could see.

Back at camp, we find a bowl of watermelon waiting for us. Sticky juice dripping from our chins, we tell stories and laugh as only old friends can. We'd all moved away since college, some to the North, some to busy lives in Atlanta. This was our reunion hike, a chance to renew friendships and revisit the kind of terrain we explored together as kids. The heat, the turtles, Stanley's hospitality...already we feel at home.

Come morning, we catch a ride on a pontoon boat across Jack's Creek, a chubby, murky arm of the lake where a yet-to-be-completed bridge will offer access to the trail on the other side. The forested path we'd been following becomes a thread through a quiet swampland, with boardwalks and log bridges over some wetter sections. Though never more than 5 miles from civilization, we taste just how wild the South can be. I round a bend and nearly step on a timber rattlesnake coiled in the middle of the trail. Later, my friend Tom notices a pair of eyes resting just above the surface of the swamp, about 75 feet away. We stop and watch the gator watching us.



When his eyes disappear below the surface, we pick up the pace, checking over our shoulders. In less than a mile, we count five alligators, most in the swamp, one basking on a log. That night, camped a safe distance from the water's edge, I wonder if these 200-pound reptiles were as curious about us as we were about them.

The next day, we emerge from the forest to find a small, cinder-block

building at the crossing of two barely traveled dirt roads. Out front, a young couple lounges on metal folding chairs, fanning themselves and shelling peanuts. In the middle of nowhere, this "convenience store" seems like nothing of the sort to most of the world. But to us, it's an oasis. Sipping glass-bottle Cokes, we ask the couple about the area's history—cotton farming, large plantation homes, and heroes of the Revolutionary War, some of whose gravesites are hidden in an abandoned field near the trail.

Ascending the sand hills where battles raged 220 years ago, I think about places like the Grand Canyon and the Cascades. Gorgeous and rugged, those landscapes in many ways don't hold a candle to the Palmetto Trail. Where men have thrown fish to birds for centuries, culture doesn't end at the trailhead, but blends into the landscape. Where else could you learn Colonial history from backwoods soda vendors perched on the edge of an alligator-filled swamp?

[route] Starting on the coast just north of Charleston, the 420-mile Palmetto Trail is broken into a dozen sections. The southern end winds through Francis Marion National Forest, then skirts Lakes Moultrie and Marion. After passing through Columbia, it rambles north through Sumter National Forest and into the South Carolina foothills and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Camping is permitted in designated areas or elsewhere along the trail with permission (see Contact). To arrange a ferry across Jack's Creek or reserve a campsite there, contact Stanley Scott at (803) 478-2793.

[season] From June to August, heat and bugs are equally punishing.

[soul food] Pick up boiled peanuts at a roadside stand or sample a lowcountry boil or hush puppies.

[guides] *The Palmetto Trail Lowcountry Guide* includes maps (\$12.95). See Contact.

[contact] Ollie Buckles, Palmetto Trail Conservation Foundation, (843) 899-3220; www.palmettoconservation.org.

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