



# Silver Bluff Birding Guide



**Audubon**

Silver Bluff  
Audubon Center  
and Sanctuary

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# Introduction

Silver Bluff Audubon Center and Sanctuary is at the south end of Silver Bluff Road (Hwy 302, becoming SR 32); 4542 Silver Bluff Rd., Jackson, SC 29831.

Silver Bluff is a 3,400-acre private National Audubon Society Sanctuary located along the banks of the Savannah River. It features extensive pine forests, bottomland hardwoods, a 100-acre grass/wildflower field, 50 acres of ponds and wetlands, and 7 miles of hiking trails. As of early 2021, 221 bird species have been recorded at SBAS and birding is good year-round.

## e-Bird hotspots

- 1) Silver Bluff Audubon - Kathwood Ponds;
- 2) Silver Bluff Audubon Center & Sanctuary
- 3) 30 Silver Bluff Audubon - Quail Trail
- 4) Silver Bluff Audubon - Tanager Woods Trail

## Seasonal Highlights

*August/September*—three managed fish ponds attract hundreds of Wood Stork and other wading birds and shorebirds—this is a spectacle not to be missed. Hundreds of Rough-winged Swallows gather prior to migrating south.

*Fall*—warbler migration can be quite good.

*Winter*—sparrows and woodpeckers are abundant, and ducks are common on Kathwood Ponds. Bald Eagles have raised eaglets every year since 1994, and the nest can be seen from the levies.

*Spring*—warbler migration; excellent Bachman's Sparrow viewing; Yellow-breasted Chat and Prairie Warbler are common; Eastern Whip-poor-will and Chuck-will's-widow.

*Summer*—nesting Swainson's, Hooded, Northern Parula, Prothonotary, and Yellow-throated Warblers; Ovenbird; Painted Bunting.

## Approaching Silver Bluff

As you drive south on Silver Bluff Road, just past the intersection with the Old Jackson Highway (SR 5), there are large agricultural fields. American Kestrel, Loggerhead Shrike, and Eastern Meadowlark often perch on the wires. The field to the east attracts American Pipits and Horned Larks in winter. The field to the west attracts large flocks of Cattle Egret, as well as Mississippi and Swallow-tailed Kite can be found in late summer. Just past these fields, Silver Bluff Road intersects a wetland. In spring, this is a good spot to hear Prothonotary Warblers sing. In late summer there

may be large groups of wading birds roosting on the east side. Traffic is light on Silver Bluff Road, but please be aware of other drivers.

## Kathwood (Stork) Ponds – ¾ mile loop trail



**Highlights:** Short trail with excellent views of ponds and mudflats. Herons, egrets, and shorebirds in late summer and fall.

From Old Jackson Highway, continue south on Silver Bluff Rd. past the railroad tracks. Kathwood Ponds are .4 miles south on the left (east). Park in front of the chain link fence with wooden bird cutouts on it. The ponds to the right (west) of the road are private property but can be scanned for birds such as Anhinga and Hooded Merganser. The telephone wires that cross the first pond on the west attract hundreds (high count of 750) of Rough-winged Swallow in August--the birds gather here to feed prior to migrating south.

At the parking site, the hardwoods above the maintenance shed attract Summer Tanager, Orchard Oriole, Eastern Kingbird, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated and other migratory warblers in spring and summer. Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Baltimore Oriole have been spotted here during migration.

Enter through the gate and walk slowly up the short dirt road to the ponds—this initial view of the pond is one of the best. A kiosk here provides viewing directions for an active Bald Eagle nest on the far side of the rail tracks. Scan the surrounding trees for perched adult or juvenile eagles, which can be present year-round. Walk in either direction—the trail is a figure 8 shape.

The brush along the dikes is good for sparrows in winter. During migration, Northern Waterthrush and Painted Bunting frequent brush near the cypress saplings. Except in summer, Wilson's Snipe frequent the pond's

muddy banks. Anhinga often perch on vegetation or structures in the ponds.

The three Kathwood Ponds are managed as late summer feeding sites for Wood Stork. Water is drained, concentrating prey such as fish, tadpoles, and crayfish. The two ponds closest to the road are completely encircled by dikes with raised, grassy roads. The third pond from the road can be viewed from two sides and is bordered by an active rail line. The ponds are about 60 yards wide so birds may be viewed at relatively close range. A spotting scope is helpful for shorebird identification. Brush and small trees along the dikes provide good cover for birders—if you are quiet the waders and shorebirds do not typically flush. Please do not harass or intentionally flush birds. Enjoy a sit at the observation platform at the south end of the middle pond. Scan the skies for falcons and other raptors.

Water levels are drawn down one pond at a time. When one pond is “fished out,” another is lowered. Wading bird numbers are typically highest in the pond where water has most recently been lowered, but birds will be present in all the ponds.



A high count of 525 Wood Stork has been tallied. High counts from e-Bird for waders are Great Egret (189), Snowy Egret (15), Cattle Egret (350), Great Blue Heron (11), Little Blue Heron (47), Green Heron (6), and Tricolored Heron (2). Both Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-Herons may be seen—look under the brush along the pond edges. Dozens of White Ibis (114) are routine and Glossy Ibis are sometimes seen. There are recent records of Roseate Spoonbill, although these striking birds remain rare.

Exposed mud attracts shorebirds—24 species have been recorded at the ponds, including (e-Bird high counts) American Avocet (10) and Black-necked Stilt (6). Close-viewing conditions provide excellent opportunities to study the “peeps”: Least Sandpiper (200), Western Sandpiper (12), and Semi-palmated Sandpiper

(8), Solitary Sandpiper (12), and Pectoral Sandpiper (50) are regular, as are Stilt (9) and Spotted (8) Sandpiper and Greater (30) and Lesser (30) Yellowlegs. Mudflats in this part of the state are hard to find, and almost any shorebird can turn up at Kathwood. Buff-breasted and Baird’s Sandpiper have been recorded, as well as American Golden Plover, Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, and Wilson’s and Red-necked Phalarope.

The pond closest to the rail tracks has emergent vegetation. Both Least and American Bitterns have been recorded here, as has Common Gallinule. Black-bellied Whistling Duck have been recorded nesting here. In winter, the ponds attract Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, and other waterfowl. Blue-winged Teal are often present in late summer. Sixteen species of ducks and geese have been seen at the ponds. Ducks typically flush as soon as they see people.

From the parking spot, walking Silver Bluff Road north and south from the Kathwood Ponds can be great birding. Walking *north* on the paved road, watch the forest edges on both sides for fall warblers such as Chestnut-sided and Blackburnian. Indigo Bunting and Blue Grosbeak nest in the regenerating pine forests to the west. The dirt road *south* takes you to a bridge over Hollow Creek. Listen here for Barred Owl. In spring through fall this is a good spot to hear and see Northern Parula and Yellow-throated Warbler. The dense vegetation on the upstream side of the road is one of the best places for thrushes in fall migration. This section of road can be a spring and fall warbler migration hotspot.

## Main Campus

Continue driving south on Silver Bluff Rd for 1 mile and the Silver Bluff Audubon Sanctuary campus is on the right. On spring and summer nights, Chuck-will’s-widow and Eastern Whip-poor-will are heard along this road. The gate to the campus is open 7 AM to 7 PM, dawn to dusk, 365 days a year. Ample parking is available on the grass to the right. The covered pavilion is a great spot to break for snacks. Check the bird feeders for American Goldfinch and Northern Cardinal. Nearby is a small butterfly garden and hummingbird feeder.

Three loop trails begin at the Campus: Quail (3 miles), Tanager (2 miles), and Nuthatch (3/4 mile). Quail Trail is good for brush and field birds and a great view of the Savannah River. Tanager Trail is a mix of habitats and includes one of the best spots for spring and fall

warbler-watching. Nuthatch Trail is a restored longleaf pine ecosystem and a great place to hear and see Bachman's Sparrows in spring and early summer.

### Quail Trail – 3 mile trail loop



The Bluff, Quail Trail. Photo by Jen McCarthy Tyrrell

**Highlights:** Sensational view of the Savannah River; brush and field birds edge and grassland birds; cultural history.

The first quarter-mile of this walk features regenerating pine and brush habitat that is good for Prairie Warbler, Indigo Bunting, and Blue Grosbeak in spring and summer. House Wren (winter), and Eastern Towhee and White-eyed Vireo (year-round) are found here. This trail is excellent for Yellow-breasted Chat in spring and summer—it is not unusual to encounter several. The pine plantations forests are good year-round for Brown-headed Nuthatch. In spring and summer, listen for Northern Bobwhite—you might get a look at a male calling from a low perch in the pines.

Approximately half a mile along the trail you will encounter a 100-acre field managed for grassland birds. Song, Swamp, Savannah, White-throated, Field, Vesper, Grasshopper, LeConte's, and Henslow's Sparrows all have been observed here; Chipping and Fox Sparrow can be found in the brushy edges. Common Yellowthroat are residents, and this is a reliable spot for Palm Warbler except in summer. Eastern Bluebird is common, due to a well-maintained nest box trail. Scan the tops of saplings in the field for Loggerhead Shrike, Eastern Meadowlark, American Kestrel, and Blue Grosbeak. Northern Harrier can be seen gliding low over the fields in winter. In later winter, American

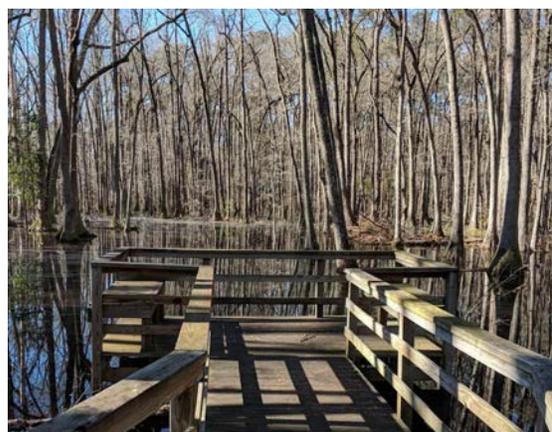
Woodcock may be heard calling soon after dusk.

The bluff overlooking the Savannah River provides a scenic view and is worth checking out. Spotted Sandpiper can be seen along both shores and Red-shouldered Hawk may be visible. In summer, watch for Mississippi Kite. Rough-winged Swallow often nest in the bank. The mature pines along the bluff are reliable for Red-Headed Woodpecker and Yellow-throated Warbler. Look and listen for Painted Bunting in the trees and scrub between here and the Galphin archaeology dig, next along the trail.

Continue along the trail for a quarter mile and you will be on the shore of the Savannah River, surrounded by tall bottomland hardwoods. The springtime early-morning warbler song here is impressive. Swainson's, Hooded, and Prothonotary Warbler can be heard here in spring and summer. In winter, scan the sweet gum and sycamore balls for American Goldfinch and Purple Finch, as well as flocks of Cedar Waxwing. There can sometimes be large numbers of American Robin here. Listen for Wood Duck in the sloughs along the river.

The trail back to the Campus is an easy walk on a dirt road. In winter, watch for Ruby and Golden-crowned Kinglets. Wild Turkey may be seen on any of the SBAS trails.

### Tanager Trail – 2 mile trail loop



Tanager Trail Boardwalk. Photo by Brandon Heitkamp

**Highlights:** Habitat diversity; swamp forest edges and warbler migration; short swamp boardwalk.

The first half-mile of Tanager is middle-age pine forest. Brushy edges can be good for White-eyed Vireo and Fox Sparrow. The trail takes a 90 degree turn to the left and more hardwoods are present. In winter, scan the tops of sycamores for Pine Siskin, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Purple Finch and American Goldfinch; Hermit Thrush are here also. Farther along the trail a 90-foot boardwalk leads to a small ephemeral pond. This area and the next half-mile of the trail are reliable for Red-headed Woodpecker.

After visiting the boardwalk, return to the main trail and turn left. The next half-mile of trail sports regenerating longleaf pine to the right and swamp hardwoods to the left. This is some of the best spring and fall warbler watching at Silver Bluff Audubon Sanctuary—Cerulean and Worm-eating have been seen here. In winter, Black-and-white Warbler and White-breasted Nuthatch may be seen. The dense vegetation under the young pines attracts Gray Catbird, White-eyed Vireo, Eastern Towhee, and House Wren. In summer Indigo Buntings and Blue Grosbeaks nest here. Watch the perches along the forest edge for Eastern Phoebe and Eastern Wood-Pewee.

The last half-mile of Tanager Trail is pine forest. A small opening to the left is sometimes good for Palm Warbler during Winter. This section of the trail is also very good for Bachman's Sparrow in spring and summer.

### Nuthatch Trail- ¾ mile trail loop



Pine Savannah of the Nuthatch Trail. Photo by: Jen McCarthy Tyrrell

**Highlights:** Longleaf pine ecosystem; Bachman's Sparrow; Red-cockaded Woodpecker Habitat; Interpretive stations for kids.

This short loop highlights longleaf pine ecosystem restoration at Silver Bluff Audubon Sanctuary. Note the lack of hardwoods on the inside of the trail and the dense native grasses—a classic pine savanna. This native habitat is good for Bachman's, Chipping, Song, and Swamp Sparrows. Pine Warbler, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, and Eastern Wood-Pewee are common in the pine boughs, as are Yellow-rumped and Palm Warbler in winter. As you complete the trail, a young longleaf pine stand on the outside of the loop provides habitat for Prairie Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Eastern Towhee, and Indigo Bunting. Northern Bobwhite can often be heard calling in summer.

Five large pines within the Nuthatch Trail loop are painted with two, white rings. These trees have been fitted with artificial cavity inserts to attract Red-cockaded Woodpecker. As of early 2021, Red-cockaded Woodpecker has yet to be reported on Silver Bluff Audubon Sanctuary, but it is only a matter of time until they nest here. Perhaps you will be the first one to spot this Endangered Species!

## Conservation Work

### And campus information



A night burn. Photo by: Brandon Heitkamp

### Deer Hunting at an Audubon Sanctuary?

Parts of Silver Bluff Audubon Sanctuary are leased to deer hunters, providing important revenue for sanctuary operations. Management reduces potential for deer overpopulation, which can damage habitat for ground-nesting species such as Chuck-wills-widow, American Woodcock, and Ovenbird. The deer clubs also help with road maintenance, managing feral hog populations, and other activities.

### Prescribed Fire is Good for Birds

Frequent, intentional, low-intensity fire—called prescribed fire—is essential for birds and ecosystems at Silver Bluff Audubon Sanctuary. Native trees, plants, and animals evolved with frequent fire and need this condition to thrive. Longleaf pine ecosystems will not flourish without frequent fire. Prescribed fire reduces hardwood growth in longleaf pine forests and is necessary for Red-cockaded Woodpecker management. Prescribed fire reduces potential for more intense wildfires that can damage habitat and property.



Tree canopy of Silver Bluff's Bird Friendly Forestry Demonstration site. Photo Credit: Jen McCarthey Tyrrell

### Timber Cutting Benefits Birds at Silver Bluff

Trees are a renewable resource. Sustainable management of pine and hardwood forests on Silver Bluff Audubon Sanctuary provides important revenue and benefits birds and wildlife. For example, selective management of hardwoods in the swamps mimics gaps or openings in the forest caused by storms or windfalls. Gaps in the tree canopy allow sunlight to reach the forest floor, encouraging undergrowth and creating ideal nesting conditions for Swainson's, Hooded, and Kentucky Warblers. Demonstrating the value of sustainable forest management is a cornerstone of the Silver Bluff education mission. Of South Carolina's 13 million acres of forests, 87% are privately owned, much of this by families. Showing family forest owners that wildlife management is compatible with sustainable timber harvest is one key to ensuring the future of our state's birds and their forest habitats.

### Red-cockaded Woodpecker Recovery at Silver Bluff

Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCWs) has never been reported at Silver Bluff, but new management programs hope to change that. Five mature longleaf pines on the Nuthatch Trail now feature artificial cavity inserts, an

important step in attracting RCWs to Silver Bluff and accelerating the woodpecker's recovery. RCWs are unique among woodpeckers in that they excavate cavities in mature, living pine trees. They nest in these cavities and roost in them at night. It can take an RCW months or years to excavate a cavity, so artificial cavities provide shelter while the birds create their own cavities. Pine forest management and artificial cavities are the "one-two" punch that will bring RCWs to Silver Bluff. RCWs currently nest at nearby locations including Hitchcock Woods in Aiken, the Savannah River Site, the Gopher Tortoise Heritage Preserve, and Fort Gordon in Augusta, Georgia.



Wood Stork foraging. Photo by: David Hooper

### Managing Water Levels for Wood Stork

When heated water effluent from nuclear reactors on the nearby Savannah River Site changed natural Wood Stork feeding areas, Silver Bluff Audubon Sanctuary was commissioned to mitigate impacts by creating new foraging ponds. Wood Storks are tactile feeders—they detect food by sweeping their bills back-and-forth in shallow water, and when prey is encountered, they snap their bills shut. The Kathwood Ponds are drained in late summer, concentrating aquatic prey such as fish, creating ideal foraging conditions for storks, and mimicking the natural lowering of water levels during late summer droughts. The ponds are particularly important as foraging habitat for recently fledged juvenile storks. The characteristic stork feeding behavior is easily observed at the Kathwood Ponds.

### Thank you!

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