

the NATURALIST CORNER

Brought to you by Peggy Potts
Coastal Master Naturalist

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Swan Song



As I approach retirement, I write my last article for the Naturalist Corner—my “swan song” so to speak. What better to highlight than the Tundra Swans that visit us here in the Lowcountry every winter. Tundra Swans are very large and entirely white with long necks. They have black bills and a small yellow spot on the back of the black facial skin in front of each eye. Their legs are also black.

They have unique sounds like bugle calls and whistles. Some describe the sound as “hoo-ho-hoo” bugle calls. But these whistling sounds are actually caused by their wings rather than by their call. Their call is more of a honking sound.

With a wingspan of almost six feet, the Tundra Swan is the state’s largest migratory waterfowl. In the winter, they can be found along the coast. In South Carolina, you can find them in the brackish waters in the Ace Basin, and you can see them near the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) Bear Island Wildlife Management Area. Flocks of around 300 birds can be seen in the marshes, abandoned rice fields, ponds, and lagoons. They migrate from the arctic tundra where they spend their summer

As a graduate of the Coastal Master Naturalist Program offered through the Clemson University Cooperative Extension, I would like to share my excitement and enthusiasm about the many wonders of nature that can be enjoyed and experienced in the lowcountry. Through this monthly column, I will share my observations, sightings, and characteristics about a variety of nature topics, such as common insects, migrating birds and butterflies, wildflowers and plants and more. Basically, anything in nature is fair game to learn about and explore.

I also encourage you to share your observations and experiences so that we can learn about our natural world together. Please feel free to send in pictures and/or information of anything you find interesting by emailing me, Peggy Potts, at ppotts@charlestoncounty.org.

months on lakes, ponds and pools. They also nest on the arctic tundra and are said to mate for life, pairing up almost a year before breeding. From their pairing, they will breed, roost, and travel together year-round. They are very territorial during breeding and nesting time and they can be very aggressive to predators.

The female lays three to five eggs. It takes about 30 days for the eggs to hatch and about two months for them to become fledglings. Both adults and young gather before their long cross-continental flight. When the Swans arrive, they form their family groups around the food sources. Their diet consists of seeds, stems, roots, and aquatic vegetation. They also eat small amounts of animal meat, mainly mollusks and agricultural grains during the winter months.

According to SCDNR, the swans are seldom seen before mid-November and they are gone by March. Birdwatchers anxiously await



their arrival each year. Those who live here are so fortunate that it’s only a short distance to see these magnificent birds. Their presence here in the Lowcountry should not be taken for granted. The time to see them is now, before they fly off once again, into the sunset.

To hear the podcast of this article, go to [greenbelt.charlestoncounty.org](https://charlestoncounty.org) under “News & Events,” “Naturalist Corner.”

Charleston County Greenbelt Program

The Greenbelt Programs have awarded funds for many properties that provide habitats for wildlife. For a list and description of our protected properties, visit greenbelt.charlestoncounty.org. Don't forget to follow us on the Greenbelt Program Facebook page!