

the NATURALIST CORNER

Brought to you by Peggy Potts
Coastal Master Naturalist
September 2019

Pretty in Pink! The Roseate Spoonbill

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.



You might think you are looking through rose-colored glasses if you happen to see this bird. Your second thought might be that the bird got caught up in a windstorm blowing it north from Florida. It's true that the Roseate Spoonbill is a common sight in coastal Florida, but it can also be found in the lowcountry. Plume hunters almost eliminated this species by the 1800's, along with other wading birds. The plumes were used in ladies' hats and fans. The near elimination of these shorebirds led to the founding of the Audubon Society, and with its protection, the birds are making a comeback. However, the Roseate Spoonbill is still considered threatened in Florida.

The Spoonbill usually arrives in the lowcountry in spring and stays through late summer. It can be found in brackish water lagoons, mudflats, and along marshes searching for food. The Roseate Spoonbill is a social bird and likes to forage and roost with other large wading birds like herons, egrets, and ibises. It has a white head and neck with part of its head a yellow-green color, and pale pink wings with a darker shade of pink around the borders. The Spoonbill gets its beautiful pink coloration from the food it eats, primarily crustaceans that contain pigments. This turns its feathers pink, similar to the flamingo. Shrimp, mollusks, snails and insects are its primary food source. Besides its beautiful color, a distinctive feature of this unique bird is its spoon-shaped bill, which is the reason for its name. Its bill is a handy tool when searching for a meal, as the Spoonbill swishes it back and forth through the water and swallows the food up when it makes contact.

The Roseate Spoonbill nests in shrubs, trees, and mangroves, and lays about two to five eggs. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, at nesting colonies, males bob their heads up and down while shaking twigs to get the attention of the female. The male and female are true partners as both participate in the construction of the nest, incubation of the eggs, and the feeding of the chicks. Spoonbills can live up to ten years.

Keep your eye out along the marshes for more of these exotic beauties. As a result of the increased awareness and protection of the Roseate Spoonbills, it is hopeful their future outlook will continue to be "rosy!"

(To hear the podcast of this article go to greenbelt.charlestoncounty.org under "News & Events," "Naturalist Corner")



Charleston County Greenbelt Program

The Greenbelt Program has protected sites where Roseate Spoonbills might be observed. For a list of protected properties, visit the Greenbelt Programs website at greenbelt.charlestoncounty.org and don't forget to follow us on the Greenbelt Programs Facebook page. When you visit any of our sites, take a picture and post it to Instagram using the hashtag #ccgreenbelt.