

PAS Grant Award Recipient 2019

Young Birder Justina age 16

Camp Talon

It was May 31, 2019 and precisely 4:07 pm. I shook with excitement as I rushed through the airport after a long flight, "ATL International Airport" signs flashing here and there. My friend warmly welcomed me, and as we walked to the parking lot we conversed excitedly about the week ahead! The day after, we stopped at Macon where we met our group of campers and our instructors Bob Sargent and Julie Duncan, next to a large bus that would be taking us on all of the field trips. After a few hours of riding and chatting, we arrived at Epworth by the Sea on St. Simons Island, where we would stay for the next few days! The boys and girls each had a cabin with six large bunk beds and an adjacent bathroom.

After eating dinner and unpacking, we explored St. Simons by Hampton River, where I saw my first Painted Bunting and heard my first Chuck-Will's-Widow. Cicadas sung into the humid evening air as the sunlight slowly left, and the Spanish moss that clung to the trees added to the magnificent view. The next morning, we went to what would be one of my favorite places in Georgia: Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge! The heat and humidity did not stop us from enjoying wild American Alligators, Barred Owls, Marsh Rabbits, Swallow-tailed Kites, Anhingas, Green Anoles, Red-headed Woodpeckers, and a scorpion. I was awestruck by the beauty of Okefenokee. Later in the day we returned to Epworth where we met up with my sister Teodelina, and spent some free time



playing soccer with the campers. Then we walked to a classroom where Bob and Julie introduced us to the basics of Ornithology, as well as birds of the area. After dinner, we explored Butler Island, a former plantation on the mouth of the Altamaha River, where we saw Pig Frogs, Least Bitterns, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Common Gallinules, and more. The day ended and we got a good night's sleep.

At breakfast the next morning, I tried my first platter of grits, a dish of boiled cornmeal traditional in the Southern United States. We explored near the cabins, where we encountered numerous green and brown anoles, heard the loud calls of a Marsh Wren, and watched a pair of Ospreys nesting on a pole above the marsh. After hopping onto the bus, we headed towards Little St. Simons Island, a private 10,000 acre barrier island which, like St. Simons, is part of the "golden isles", named for their particularly stunning sunsets. After landing on the island, we loaded onto the beds of two pickup trucks, which had wooden seats built into them. A summer Tanager perched nicely for us as we rode through the island's maritime forest. We stopped at a blind from which we saw an array of wildlife: Roseate Spoonbills perching, Alligators laying on the mud, Gallinules



silently wading, and dragonflies zooming past. We explored Sancho Panza beach afterward, where we encountered Wilson's Plovers, Sandwich and Least Terns, Horseshoe Crabs, Willets, Black Skimmers, Tiger Beetles, and Brown Pelicans. On the road back from the beach, a camper found a bird species, which although seen on the island occasionally during migration, was unheard of in June: a Blackburnian Warbler! It was a beautiful female, with a throat the color of the sun. We visited Norms Pond after the surprise bird, where a Wood Stork stood with its three babies in a nest. There also were Anhingas perching on trees, Great Egrets calling to their young, and Black Vultures soaring the skies. After visiting the pond, we ate lunch at the

island's barn and attended a researcher's presentation about plovers. After the thank you's and goodbyes, we left the island and enjoyed a dinner break at Epworth. As the evening rolled on, we found a Gray Kingbird in Neptune Park, and studied groups of terns huddling closely together on small islands of sand out in the ocean near Postell Creek. Skimmers and Sandwich Terns were spotted amongst the numerous Royal Terns. In the night I went scavenging with some friends in search of geckos and frogs!

The next morning, we left early for Cumberland Island. The bus dropped us off at Crooked River State Park, from which two law enforcement agents brought us to the island using two separate boats. While in Cumberland, Broadhead Skinks climbed the tall trees and wild horses grazed the grasses, while Yellow-throated Warblers clung from the Spanish moss. The history of the island is intriguing: Nathaniel Greene, Thomas Morrison Carnegie and his wife, and James Edward Oglethorpe were once there. We hiked along the main trail and stopped for a little while when The Dungeness (the first mansion built on the island) stood before us. Its beauty is truly radiant! After more birding we walked back toward the boats, when all of a sudden we heard a big thundering noise. Two horses galloped away at full speed as a massive tree fell over! Thankfully, nobody was hurt. At the dock, Two Manatees raised their nostrils above water, as if to say farewell. We stopped for ice cream on our way back from the island, where my sister and I tried Georgia peach ice cream for the first time! It was delicious. Back in the classroom, Bob taught us common bird characteristics and songs we heard throughout the field trips. A fun game of tennis with a few of my fellow campers followed, and later that night I sat with my friends and we listened to some good music while coloring in our field notebooks.

On our last full day, we explored Sapelo Island. I analyzed shelf fungi there with my mycophile friends and ecologist Malcom Hodges, who is very knowledgeable about lichens. Bluejackets dotted the forest here and there, and Swallowtails fluttered past. There was a small creek where I examined the behavior of Eastern Mosquitofish and a Sailfin Molly with a few campers. We observed the molly releasing its eggs, but the mosquitofish kept eating them. I definitely have not seen this

behavior before! Then we heard a camper exclaiming about a huge moth on the wall of a small store. I ran to where the campers were crowding, to find a majestic Imperial Moth, four inches across! For the rest of our time at Sapelo, we found Blue Grosbeaks, Pine Warblers, Orchard Orioles, Tricolored Herons, Forster's Terns, Black Oystercatchers, Willets, and more. When we arrived at Epworth, we turned in our field notebooks to Julie, who would look them over and pick the winners of the field notebook competition that took place in camp. In the classroom, a bird photo ID and birdsong ID quiz took place, where new and repeat campers got the chance to win educational birding-related prizes. Shortly after, Julie announced that I placed third for the field notebook contest, following two talented friends of mine. We played a very fun game of bird charades afterwards! The rules of the game were simple: A camper must imitate a specific bird by behavior or song and one of the two teams must guess the species.

It was the very last day, and we packed our suitcases and had a quick breakfast stop at Waffle House. We explored Fort Stewart afterwards, where we saw lots of interesting wildlife including two endangered Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, Harvestmen (a type of arachnid), frog eggs, Pitcher Plants, Wolf Spiders, and a Toothpick Grasshopper. The last new bird of the morning was a gorgeous Prothonotary Warbler. At noon, we enjoyed some good quality pizza and I listened to my friends discussing physics, which was truly a fascinating conversation to hear! As we unloaded at the same parking lot where we first gathered, we expressed our gratitude to the instructors, and said our goodbyes to the campers.

I give a special thanks to the Pasadena Audubon Society, for generously awarding my sister and I scholarships for this camp. I feel honored to be part of this community. Good birding to you all!