



Sapelo Island

National Estuarine Research Reserve



Location: 7.5 miles northeast of Darien, Georgia

Date Designated: 1976

Area Protected: 7,500 acres

Web Address: sapelonerr.org

Access and Infrastructure

- Sapelo Island is only accessible by state-run ferry or private boat (island residents only).
- The visitor center is located on the mainland, near the Meridian ferry dock. Exhibits feature the history of Sapelo Island and information about barrier island ecosystems. A mile-long upland nature trail starts and ends at the center.
- Reserve offices and an education facility are located on the island, in and around the historic Long Tabby building. An on-island nature trail features a one-mile hike through the maritime forest, marsh, tidal creek, beach, and dune habitats characteristic of Georgia's barrier islands.

Management: Daily oversight is provided by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. NOAA's Office for Coastal Management provides funding, national guidance, and technical assistance.

The Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve occupies over one-third of Sapelo Island, Georgia's fourth largest barrier island and one of the most undisturbed. The Reserve covers 1,440 acres of upland – mostly maritime or mixed oak-pine forest – 5,245 acres of saltmarsh, and over 800 acres of open water. About 90 percent of the marsh is covered by smooth cordgrass. Salt marsh habitats support egrets and herons, rails, oysters, mussels and other mollusks, numerous species of crab, and countless invertebrates. Endangered and threatened species found here include bald eagles, wood storks, Wilson's plovers, loggerhead sea turtles, and manatees. Northern right whales calve off the Georgia coast in spring.

This research reserve protects estuaries, monitors environmental conditions, offers educational and training programs, and undertakes the scientific research needed by Georgia's coastal counties, the state, and the nation. Focus areas include water quality, coastal and estuarine ecosystem protection, and coastal hazards resilience.

NOAA Office for Coastal Management

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Interesting Things to Know

- A Native American shell ring, measuring nearly 300 feet across, provides evidence that people lived on Sapelo Island 4,500 years ago.
- The only private community on the state-owned island is Hog Hummock, a Saltwater Geechee community. Many of the residents are descendants of enslaved peoples who lived on the island in the 1800s.
- The Sapelo Island Lighthouse, active during the plantation and timber-boom eras, stands on the south end of the island, within reserve boundaries, as does the historic Reynolds Mansion, which is operated as a state-run guest lodge.
- The first two living shorelines constructed in Georgia are near the main office. Both feature bagged oyster shells as the dominant structural component.
- The world-famous University of Georgia Marine Institute is located within the reserve, on the south end of the island. Since 2000, it has hosted the Georgia Coastal Ecosystems Long Term Ecological Research program.

About the Programs

The nation's 30 research reserves represent a tremendous asset, protecting nearly 1.4 million acres and providing habitat where plants and wildlife thrive. Community benefits include recreation, flood protection, and water filtration. Because the following programs are offered at each reserve, the system is able to make an environmental impact at the local level, as well as nationally.

Stewardship. Site protection and enhancement are part of every research reserve. Activities may include managing land and water resources, restoring habitat, controlling invasive species, maintaining biodiversity, and reducing environmental stressors.

Research. Reserve research is focused on how environmental factors—such as nutrient loading, climate change, invasive species, and storms—impact coastal ecosystems. The System-Wide Monitoring Program, or SWMP, provides long-term data on water quality, weather, biological communities, habitat, and land-use and land-cover characteristics. This combination of research and data provides a strong, science-based foundation for addressing coastal management challenges.

Training. To provide the community with the information and skills needed to integrate coastal science into local decision-making and everyday lives, reserves provide specialized courses and information. Reserve training professionals are active in community planning and improvement initiatives.

Education. Local data generated at the reserve provide students with a firsthand experience of local environmental conditions. Educators lead student, teacher, and citizen field trips that are life-changing experiences, as participants see, feel, and smell what makes an estuary one of the most remarkable places in the world.

To learn more, visit coast.noaa.gov/nerrs.

Office for Coastal Management

