



It's Only Natural

South Carolina Is Home to Rare and Wondrous Plant and Animal Species

(May 1, 2019) – It's amazing how living things somehow figure out ways to adapt to unusual environments and conditions ... so they don't just survive, but completely thrive. South Carolina is home to an incredible array of plants and animals whose unique characteristics and behaviors capture the interest of the state's millions of human visitors and residents. Many of these living things are at their most active in the spring and summer months; now that May is upon us, we've provided a summary of some of the natural phenomena you can witness on a visit to South Carolina. For more information about a trip to the state, check out www.discoversouthcarolina.com.

MAMMALS

Dolphins

Near the mouth of the Kiawah River, where it runs into the Atlantic Ocean by Captain Sam's Spit on **Kiawah Island**, visitors can watch a fascinating behavior as pods of dolphins work together to create an all-you-can-eat seafood buffet. There are less than four places on earth where the phenomenon of "strand-feeding" has been observed, and the pods of dolphins that live here in the river (they don't ever venture into the Atlantic) pass this extraordinary behavior from one generation to the next. The dolphins work together to form a line in the river and then "herd" fish onto the banks; they launch themselves out of the water and onto the riverbank to feed, then squirm back into the river to try it again. They'll do this repeatedly, to the delight of the island's pelican population, until they're full. [Kiawah Island Golf Resort](#) provides motorboat, kayak and SUP dolphin excursions so that visitors – resort guests and non-guests alike – have an excellent chance of witnessing this unusual behavior. Though the dolphins live in the river year-round, strand feeding is something that typically occurs during warmer weather, spring through fall.

BIRDS

Purple Martins

In the middle of [Lake Murray](#), not too far from the city of **Columbia**, in the summer months the sky grows dark twice a day as hundreds of thousands of purple martins come to roost at an island that goes by many names – Bomb Island (the island was once a practice bombing range for

World War II pilots), Lunch Island, Doolittle Island. These days, no matter what you choose to call it, it functions as the largest purple martin sanctuary in North America. Between 800,000 and 1 million purple martins arrive here each year; they come to roost every evening in the summer from late June to early August, with peak activity in mid- to late July. [Public boat tours](#) depart in the evenings so visitors can see the birds coming to roost between 8 and 9:15 p.m. Likewise, if early risers secure a vessel, they could see the morning take-off between 5:30 and 7 a.m. During the day the birds fly over several miles to feed, but they return to the island every night ... until the end of summer, that is. By September the birds have left for warmer weather in South America.

Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers

This endangered species of woodpecker is right at home in [Cheraw State Park](#) and [Carolina Sandhills National Wildlife Refuge](#), both located in **Chesterfield County**. There are only about 14,000 such birds in existence anywhere in the world, and Chesterfield County is home to a large population of the species. The small black-and-white birds – the males have a tiny red streak, called a “cockade,” on each side of their black caps – live in fire-dependent pine savannas and bore out cavities in older trees, where the wood is softer. Naturalists and park authorities conduct controlled burns to protect the birds’ habitats, but the rare woodpeckers are down to just 1 percent of their original population. They live in South Carolina year-round but are always very hard to spot. Birdwatchers the world over visit sites like this to mark the species off their “life lists.”

INSECTS

Synchronous Fireflies

As part of their annual mating ritual, the fireflies in South Carolina’s only national park, [Congaree](#), near the capital city of **Columbia**, synchronize themselves and blink in unison. This is an incredibly rare phenomena, happening in only about a dozen places around the world. There are about 2,000 species of firefly found in North America, but the species that makes its home in Congaree, *Photinus frontalis*, blinks more rapidly than most other species, making the display here that much more fascinating. The ritual takes place for two to three weeks in late May and early June each year. Though the exact dates that the fireflies are active vary by year, this year the park’s visitor center will be open until 10 p.m. each night from May 10 through May 27. During this period, the park will operate a designated Fireflies Trail that offers access to prime viewing locations. The best time to see the fireflies is just after dark, generally between 9 and 10 p.m. The city of Columbia has so embraced these insects that they’ve named their minor league baseball team the [Columbia Fireflies](#). (It should be noted that the baseball team’s season lasts much longer than the actual fireflies’ mating season.)

Bees

Greenwood is world-renowned for its flowers. It gained prestige as the headquarters of the Park Seed Company, once one of the most successful mail-order seed companies, and from that stemmed Greenwood’s role as the host city of the annual [South Carolina Festival of Flowers](#). And

with flowers, of course, come bees. Now home to seven “pollinator gardens” and with plans to plant even more, Greenwood was designated a [Bee City](#) in 2017 and is one of 79 such cities across the country. The gardens were especially designed to attract bees, monarch butterflies and even hummingbirds with their pollinator-friendly plants. For decades Greenwood has embraced its floral culture, so it’s only natural that its residents have created new opportunities to study, enhance and protect bee habitats. The best times to see the bees – from a safe distance – are spring and summer.

PLANTS

Rocky Shoals Spider Lilies

The world’s largest display of the threatened rocky shoals spider lily can be found in the Catawba River in [Landsford Canal State Park](#) in the town of **Catawba**. Exposed bedrock and an impressive elevation change have created a set of rapids – or shoals – on the river. It’s unbelievable that anything can grow in this harsh environment, yet these rare beauties somehow root themselves onto the rocks as the river water rushes by. Each lily blooms overnight and only lasts for a single day, but there are enough plants in the Catawba River that in the months of May and June it appears as if someone has tossed a lace blanket across the water. The very best viewing is from a canoe or kayak, and visitors can bring their own vessel or participate in a tour offered by local outfitters. Those who prefer a softer adventure can take a 1.5-mile round-trip hike along the Canal Trail to an overlook that affords a prime land-based view of the lilies.

Oconee Bells

The rare Oconee Bell flower only grows in the Southern Appalachian region of the United States, right along the banks of streams. There’s a large population of them in the Jocassee Gorges region of the Carolinas, but the very best place to view them is in [Devils Fork State Park](#) in **Salem**, which even boasts its own Oconee Bell Trail. Though the plant itself is evergreen, its small white and yellow blossom is only visible from mid-March to early April and lasts for just a few weeks. The Friends of Jocassee, a nonprofit organization that supports the preservation of the lake, hosts an annual “BellFest” on the third Saturday of March at Devils Fork. During the event, experts offer guided tours during which they’ll point out the bell-shaped flowers. Whether or not they participate in BellFest, in blooming season park visitors stand a good chance of spotting the flowers during a hike through the park or a boat tour on the lake.

Carnivorous Plants

The bogs and coastal wetlands of the Carolinas are a perfect breeding ground for some of the world’s most “vicious” plants – carnivorous ones like pitcher plants, honeydew and the infamous Venus flytrap. [Moore Farms Botanical Garden](#) near **Lake City** is home to a Bog Garden that features more than 2,500 plants, including those that have adapted to eating bugs in order to supplement the nutrients that are now lacking in their native habitats. Pitcher plants attract moths, bees and beetles with their vibrant color; the insects crawl around the plant’s rim, lose their footing and ultimately fall into the “pitcher,” where they become trapped by the plant’s sticky digestive fluid. It all sounds

gruesome, but it's quite fascinating. To replicate the atmosphere of a typical bog, Moore Farms irrigates its bog garden with a special underground system that has led to the botanical garden being home to one of the largest carnivorous plant collections in the South. Because these meat-eating plants tend to go dormant during the winter months, the ideal time to see them in action is from May until the first frost.

Rare Plants and Flowers

[Stevens Creek Heritage Preserve](#) in [Sumter National Forest](#) in the town of **McCormick** is a fascinating place because it boasts an unusual underlying of bedrock. That, in turn, produces a high pH soil that offers a perfect growing environment for a variety of rare plants. On a hike along the trail that leads through the preserve it's likely that visitors can spot the "Lake Miccosukee gooseberry," a rare shrub that can only be seen on its namesake lake in the Florida Panhandle and in this part of South Carolina. Another plant whose only home in South Carolina is here in the national forest is the "false rue anemone," and the "shooting star" only appears in a few places with high-calcium soil. The amusingly-named "Dutchman's breeches," whose flowers look like tiny pairs of white trousers that have been hung out to dry, are common in other parts of the country but very rare in South Carolina.

AND A BONUS

Carolina Bays

[Bay swamps](#), unusual elliptical or oval depressions found in both North and South Carolina, are freshwater wetland. They fill with rainwater in the winter and spring but dry up in the summer and are named "bay swamps" because they're home to bay trees. Carolina Bays always have a northwest-southeast orientation, raised sand rims and depressed interiors. They become their own little ecosystems when they're active, playing home to rare plants as well as reptiles and amphibians, mammals, and wading birds. In the regions where such bays are found, including **North Myrtle Beach**, responsible developers have a healthy respect for the bays and make every attempt to preserve them as they create places for human visitors to live, work and play. In fact, the North Myrtle Beach Park & Sports Complex draws attention to these geographical features and uses them as part of its overall design. It integrates nature trails and jogging and hiking trails on the borders of the bays, providing a close-up experience with and glimpse at this unique topography.

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