Bob Sargent and Linda May taught the 14th edition of Camp TALON (Teen Adventures Learning about Ornithology and Nature) on the coast last week. Twenty-one teenagers from five states participated, including one boy who traveled from Seattle to learn about Georgia’s birds. We picked up most of the campers in Macon and transported them via rental bus to Epworth-by-the-Sea on St. Simons Island, which was our base camp for six days. Campers who live on the coast were brought to Epworth by their parents.

Every morning started early with road and boat trips to some of the best birding sites the coast has to offer: Little St. Simons Island, Jekyll Island State Park, Andrews Island, St. Simons Island, Crooked River State Park, the famous rookery on Gilman Pond (private property), Sapelo Island, and Ft. Stewart. Other teachers joined us at nearly every stop to share with the campers their knowledge and enthusiasm about birds, plants, ecology, and related topics. Sometimes the lessons were unplanned and spontaneous, such as when we spotted a gopher tortoise at Crooked River State Park, and this led to a roadside lesson about early successional habitats and keystone species. The teen birders learned about habitats and management practices, bird species identification, avian anatomy and physiology, how birds fly and how and why they sing, migration, island history and ecology, the life and diversity of beach invertebrates, conservation issues, career opportunities, why birds are ecologically important and how the campers can contribute to their conservation, and how to keep a journal. Most importantly, the campers had several opportunities to speak with graduate students, naturalists, biologists, and retired professors about research and careers.

*Camp TALON’s class of 2024, including Malcolm Hodges and Bob Sargent, returns to the mainland on the ferry after a day of birding on Sapelo Island.*
At Andrews Island, the campers saw avocets, stilts, peeps, and white pelicans. At Little St. Simons, they saw four American flamingos, witnessed a mist-netting operation, and learned about shorebird studies. At Gilman Pond, they saw one of the most incredible rookeries in the state and learned about wading bird surveys and wood stork biology. At Sapelo Island, they got a fleeting glimpse of a chachalaca, learned about island plant zones and the importance of the saltmarsh, saw several painted buntings, and climbed the lighthouse. At Ft. Stewart, they learned about red-cockaded woodpeckers, prescribed fire, timber management, and used a peeper camera to see RCW and bluebird nestlings in tree cavities. Along their journey they also were treated to presentations about Georgia’s Wildlife Resources Division and its mission, the history of bird conservation and wildlife laws in the U.S., how to use birding apps, and they participated in an activity designed to teach about the triumphs and perils birds face when migrating.
At the end of six days, the teenagers had recorded 130 species of birds along with several species of reptiles, frogs, mammals, butterflies, a long list of plant species, and various beach invertebrates. They snapped hundreds of photos, met and established lifelong connections with other bird-obsessed teens, and several made a point of collecting names, phone numbers, and addresses of potential career mentors. All the campers took prizes home such as binoculars, natural history books, DVDs and CDs, caps, posters, and binocular harnesses. Oh, and they didn’t have to endure non-stop lectures. The camp took timeouts so the teens could visit the pool at Epworth and toss a football. There were ice cream, pizza, and Waffle House stops on the itinerary. And who could forget the visit to St. Simons Island’s East Beach where the campers decided to do their best imitation of sanderlings - first chasing and then fleeing from the waves - for 30 minutes!

*Linda May gives the campers a Gopher Tortoise ecology lesson at Crooked River State Park.*

*Great Crested Flycatcher fledglings, Crooked River State Park.*
Chris Depkin and the campers admire the rookery at Gilman Pond.

Two of the four American Flamingos the campers saw on LSSI.

Stacia Hendricks poses with some of the campers on LSSI.
Bob and Linda thank the many people and entities who made this adventure possible starting with essential financial support from TERN, the Georgia Ornithological Society, and Birds Georgia. Much appreciation also goes to the other teachers and coordinators: retired professors Bob Sattelmeyer and Bob Cooper; WRD’s Tim Keyes, Chris Depkin, Fred Hay, Justin Alexander, Blaine Tyler, and Adam Mackinnon; the LSSI all-star team: Stacia, Aurora, Eva, Hailey, Adam, Diane, Beck (the latter two are UGA students working on LSSI), and especially Hank and Wendy for supporting our LSSI adventure every year; retired TNC ecologist Malcolm Hodges; and Ft. Stewart’s wildlife chief Larry Carlile.

*Larry Carlile demonstrates the use of a peeper camera at Ft. Stewart.*

*Red-cockaded Woodpecker nestlings, Ft. Stewart.*
Bob Sattelmeyer and Bob Cooper watch shorebirds with the campers at Gould’s Inlet.

Two of the campers working hard to get a perfect photo of a Snowy Egret.

Zebra Longwing, Jekyll Island Campground.