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Campbell Vaughn: Rare bird for Georgia spotted on Ogeechee River fishing trip

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I got to do some fun traveling with my son last week. We had been planning on taking a trip somewhere in July and finally pieced together a journey that was both fun and outdoorsy. I tend to be the one who likes to get into the woods more than my 14-year-old, but he was open to getting out and playing in the wild.

We took off Thursday after lunch and met one of my oldest friends and his son at his cabin down on the Ogeechee River in Screven County. Anyone that is a river lover and likes to be in the middle of nowhere, this part of the Ogeechee is for you. Beautiful river, gigantic cypress trees and wildlife galore.

You might remember last fall I wrote about a huge eastern diamondback rattlesnake we saw down there in September. This trip we got to see a different kind of wildlife. While we were out in the boat trying to catch some redbreasts for dinner, we witnessed a pair of beautiful birds that were working their way down the river darting and diving for food. My buddy mentioned that this was only the second or third year he had seen them. We took a moment to identify them and learned they were Swallow-tailed kites. And boy were they gorgeous.

Audubon had a great description of them, noting the Swallow-tailed kite is the “most beautiful bird of prey, striking in its shape, its pattern, and its extraordinarily graceful flight. Hanging motionless in the air, swooping and gliding, rolling upside down and then zooming high in the air with scarcely a motion of its wings, the Swallow-tailed Kite is a joy to watch. At one time it was common in summer over much of the Southeast, but today it is found mostly in Florida and a few other areas of the Deep South.” In other words, it isn’t often we get to see them up in Georgia and what we witnessed was pretty special.

The habitat map shows that these kites live throughout Florida, but will uncommonly breed along the edges of the Gulf Coast from the Florida panhandle, most of southern Louisiana and down along the Texas coastline. They are also known to be seen, but don’t often nest on the

Atlantic coastline in Georgia to about Charleston. According the map, these Swallow-tailed kites don't often visit the Ogeechee River in Screven County, but do like the wooded swamp with tall trees so they weren't completely out of their preferred habitat.

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The shape of the bird is really like a kite. Like it was meant to fly but also soar, dart, dip and dive. Adding to incredible form of the bird were the striking colors. The Swallow-tailed kite head, belly and meaty part under the wings are all white with the edges of the wings and forked tail being a dark greyish blue to almost black.

The pair we watched would stop and hang out at the top of cypress together and then one would take off and cruise up the river foraging with the next one not far behind. One member of the pair came within a few yards of the boat skimming the surface to get a little drink.

Dieting mostly on larger insects like dragonflies and grasshoppers, these kites are also known to eat frogs, lizards, snakes and even other birds. Since this pair didn't seem to have any little ones in a nest nearby, as we eased up the river in the boat, the birds seemed to come into and out of view regularly.

I am a lucky guy to have good friends with fun places to unwind and get to enjoy some of the super cool things mother nature has to offer. Eating freshly caught fried redbreast for dinner wasn't all that bad either.