

# The Augusta Chronicle

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## COLUMNS

# Campbell Vaughn: Trips to Georgia coast, Florida include sightings of a manatee, birds of prey

**Campbell Vaughn** Augusta Chronicle

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Back-to-back weekends of fun on the water helped ease some of the stress we had around the office. Don't worry, our Extension staff are great, but we had to move offices after being in the same location for 35 years.

Those who didn't know we moved, we are only a block away from the old office and settling in nicely.

On Memorial weekend, my family met some of our friends for a food filled time at their place in Shellman Bluff on the Georgia coast. We cooked a bunch and took the boat to a sand bar that appears for four hours during the lowest part of the tide change. The teenage boys took on the challenge of who could eat the most Krystal hamburgers in 12 minutes for lunch one day.

On the final day of the weekend, we have a routine of taking out the boats and hauling them back to the house to scrub all the salt water and mud we had tracked all over every surface of the vessels. When we were removing the boats at the lift, the proprietor of the place mentioned that there was a manatee swimming under one of the slips. He was right there where the boats were docking to get lifted out of the water. The fellow running the lift immediately turned on some fresh water from the fish cleaning station to let it drain into the salty river below for the manatee, which he stated the large sea mammals seem to enjoy.

It was the first time I have ever seen what some refer to as a sea cow. The manatee was very slow and methodical in its movement and not in a hurry to get out of the way. Even though there were about 15 trailers lined up to get their boats out of the water and head home, the giant mammal was directly in the way. Being slightly selfish, I was excited to have the big guy in the way just so I could get a few more glances.

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The following weekend involved an annual trip that a big group of guys takes to Astor, Florida to fish on the St. John's River near Lake George. This was my second year going, so I guess I behaved well enough on my first trip to get invited back this year for more fun.

**Campbell Vaughn:** [Why are you killing your plants? See what you're doing wrong.](#)

There is something to be said about the Florida sun. The first couple of days were so hot that I was concerned when adding a split shot to my fishing line that the piece of lead would not only burn my fingers, but it would also melt the monofilament line I was attaching it to. The afternoon thunderstorm helped cool the temperature, but the rapid boat ride across the lake to get out of the storm was like getting shot with bb guns with the rain hitting us at 50 mph.

On the first afternoon we were fishing, you could see a smoke cloud bellowing in the distance of some type of brushfire. All a sudden, a helicopter with a large hose dangling from the bottom of the fuselage dove down a few hundred yards away and nearly landed on the lake. After hovering for about a minute with lake mist spraying all over from its gigantic rotors and the hose obviously sucking up water, the whirlybird raced off in the direction of the smoke only to return 10 minutes later to do it all over again. He was fighting the wildfire with this payload of lake water to keep it somewhat contained. This continued well after the fish quit biting and we moved up the river to find some new place to drop some lines.

This area of Florida is absolutely loaded with birds of prey. Every channel marker and abandoned pier had an osprey nest attached with most of the nests occupied by fledglings. Every third airborne osprey had a fish dangling by their talons ready to feed some young.

On multiple instances during the trip, I had the privilege of spotting my favorite raptor, the swallow-tailed kite. Although they were not competing with us for fish, these kites darted through the trees and around the water grabbing frogs, lizards and insects. We also saw plenty of vultures, hawks, gulls, cormorants, herons and cranes. I would hate to not mention those piles of alligators that were chipping all around talking to their young.

The last fun wildlife encounter happened to a group of guys on the trip that were down the river from us fishing off the bank in an area that looked like it backed up to the Vietnam jungles. They got knee deep in the water and were catching bluegill left and right. When they threw a fish up on the bank before they could get the bream to the cooler, a raccoon came out of the woods and grabbed it and took it back to his nest. Undeterred, the masked mammal showed back up for another snack. Before it was all said and done, “Sneaky Pete” (as the guys ended up naming him) got a belly full.