

Birds of Prey on Edisto Beach

General Description

Birds of prey or raptors comprise a specialized group of birds that hunt live prey or carrion in order to survive. They have acute eyesight for spotting prey, sharp claws (talons) for seizing prey, and a hooked, sharp bill for tearing prey.

There are 19 birds of prey that call South Carolina home. Some of the more notable birds of prey that call Edisto Beach home include sharp-shinned, Cooper's, and red-tailed hawks; American kestrels; merlins; northern harriers; swallow-tailed and Mississippi kites; bald eagles; great-horned, barred, and eastern screech owls; and lastly both black and turkey vultures.



Red-tailed Hawk

Photo by Bill Cummming



Northern Harrier

Photo by Bill Cummming

The ospreys frequent bodies of water around Edisto where they will plunge into the waters after a fish. The bald eagles hunt a variety of prey. They also are scavengers of carcasses and will steal prey from other raptors. In addition, they will also snatch blackbirds from a marsh, catch fish, mammals, ducks off a pond, and reptiles.



Bald Eagle

Photo by Bill Cumming

Black vultures and turkey vultures are usually seen together, roosting together, and both feed on carrion (animal carcasses), soaring high looking for food. Turkey vultures have an excellent sense of smell, whereas black vultures do not. Black vultures partly rely on turkey vultures to help find decomposing animals and are often seen eating roadkill -- interesting relationship between these two types of vultures!

You may see both swallow-tailed and Mississippi kites flying overhead. These kites have long, pointed tails and are masterful fliers; they are able to “float” in the air with ease. Their ability to catch small prey on the wing is unmatched!



Swallow-tailed Kite

Photo by Bill Cumming

Edisto Island is home to great-horned, barred, and eastern screech owls (red and grey morphs). They are characterized by their carnivorous diet, sharp talons, and are primarily nocturnal. They also have specialized feathers that make no noise when they fly! They like to “perch and pounce” for their prey.



Barred Owl
Photo by Bill Cumming

Nesting

Many of the birds of prey nest on Edisto Beach. If you are lucky enough you will spot an osprey nest high atop a pole or tall bare treetop. In fact there is frequently an osprey nest that is visible right before you go over the McKinley Washington Jr. Bridge (aka Dawhoo River Bridge) as you approach the island. Bald eagles also nest on Edisto Beach as well. Look for a huge nest of sticks (6 feet in diameter) in large trees in any of the forested areas around Edisto. All four species of owls found in South Carolina also nest on Edisto Island, although these nests may be harder to spot.

Migration

Raptors migrate in the fall and spring; however, their biggest migration here on Edisto is from September to November where you can spot thousands of vultures, falcons, ospreys, bald eagles, and hawks heading south. Edisto is a “Super Highway” for fall migration!

Protect Our Birds of Prey

More than likely you will not come in close contact with any of these birds of prey as they spend most of their time in the air or in tree tops. If you do encounter one of these birds, as with all wildlife, maintain a respectable distance. If you encounter a bird of prey that you

believe is injured or in distress, please call Avian Medical Clinic at (843) 971-7474, option 1. They will send out a transporter who can safely transport the bird to the clinic for evaluation.

Sources: South Carolina Department of Natural Resources <https://dnr.sc.gov> and <https://thecenterforbirdsofprey.org> (2025)