



Taylor Montgomery enjoys the post-birding cruise



Captain Bert explains cockpit instruments to Taylor and Sophie Roehse

## **Brunswick Wildlife Birding on the Solomon T**

Do you like your wildlife viewing with a side order of history? I know I do. We are graced to live where wildlife and history are readily available year-round. From Fort Fisher to Bald Head Island to Fort Caswell to Southport to Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson you should be able to satisfy your cravings for both.

Motoring through the core of this Lower Cape Fear heritage circle is the Solomon T out of the Southport marina. The Cape Fear River estuary is a place of transition from fresh to saltwater with tidal creeks rising and falling, flooding the marsh before retreating. The rhythm of twice daily high and low tides controls the lives of most salt marsh inhabitants...including its abundant birds.

Part of our heritage itself, the Solomon T is a North Carolina workboat built in 1938 and restored by Bert Felton. It is one of a vanishing breed of Harker's Island-styled boats that have played an important part in North Carolina's maritime history. She was built on the North Banks and roamed from the Wanchese harbor, working inside and outside of the Oregon Inlet.

The boat was rescued from a creek near Wanchese, where it sat with a burned out motor, and trucked to New Hanover County. It took a year for Bert and a local shipbuilder to rebuild her. The long search for the right boat had ended, Bert's dream realized.

Bert and Becky (his wife and first mate) conduct narrated tours on the boat focusing on our maritime and natural heritage. The passage upriver on the Cape Fear and around the inlet offers views of Battery Island, a chain of spoil islands, thousands of acres of salt marsh, and close-up views of the estuary's wading and beach-nesting birds.

I have been out with the Feltons a number of times over the last two years, sometimes serving as a birding guide for their party and sometimes just exploring and taking photos. The exploring has taken us as far upriver as Big Pelican Island at the top of the chain.

Each island in the chain offers its own mix of beach-nesting birds to complement the huge numbers of ibises on Battery Island. It is always a treat to see breeding colonies of Royal Terns, Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls, and American Oystercatchers living together in relative peace and sharing the common defense. They are separated by species into puddles that are packed together forming an avian mosaic.

The airspace overhead reminds me of a major international airport...at a given time some of each species are flying in several directions, many coming in for a landing. No human devised air traffic control system could sort this out.

A few oystercatchers are seen on all islands. They tend to nest on the edge where the grass meets the sand. If you are lucky, you may see the little ones running around the legs of their parents.

On the day these photos were taken, we took members of the Acton and Roehse families to Battery to see the birds. Southport residents Barb and Fred Acton are the birders. Marion Roehse and her two kids were visiting from Germany.

In addition to the ibises, there was a good mix of other waders including Great Egrets, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons, and Black-crowned Night-Herons plus a few oystercatchers on the beach.

After the birding part of the tour, Bert ran up two selected pirate flags and headed upriver. The flags of Stede Bonnet and Blackbeard, pirates with Cape Fear history, were flown. We learned the traditional skull-and-crossbones flag is generic as pirate flags go.

“We all really enjoyed this trip, very relaxing and informative. The girls enjoyed hearing pirate stories and especially enjoyed choosing the pirate flags to fly” said Barb. “My husband and I enjoyed passing the bird sanctuary, being close enough to really get a good look with our binoculars, and hearing about the different species”.

Well Taylor and Sophie seem to have long careers ahead of them as birders...er, make that pirates!

There should be no wonder why the Solomon T has been used for the pirate boot camp for kids run by the NC Maritime Museum at Southport. Fittingly, the 2006 movie *Pirate Kids II*, about the search for Blackbeard's skull was filmed in the Southport area and, you guessed it, the Solomon T had a supporting role!

Solomon T was not the boat's original name. In renaming the boat, Bert conducted research of maritime records at the Mystic Seaport Museum and in London.

A researcher pointed out the ship log of Solomon Townsend, of Oyster Bay, NY and Captain of the brig “Sally”, who made at least two trips up the Cape Fear in the 1770's to the port at Brunswick Town.

Having to read the changing conditions in the river, the trip from the bar to the port took three days. To memorialize this bit of Cape Fear River history Bert and Becky, rejecting the name Sally, decided on Solomon T.

Seamen are among the most superstitious beings on earth. They believe that, once christened, renaming a “documented” boat is asking for a disaster. Also, boats named for men and those with a name ending with the letter “a” are thought to be jinxed. The latter superstition was reinforced by the 1915 sinking of the RMS *Lusitania*. Not to mention many captains who renamed their boat for a new wife, only to have their boat sink.

Forget superstition, the Solomon T and those named for folks like Eisenhower and Kennedy are still riding high in the water!

Solomon T tours are part of the expansion of nature-based tourism in our area. I first met Bert when he was volunteering for Brunswick Town and I was working as a volunteer for the NC Birding Trail. Together, we developed the application that led to Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson being included on the trail. In addition, he attended the Birder Friendly Business Training Program and is certified by the NC Birding Trail.

A tour may be customized to suit your interests. Subjects may include colonial history; lighthouses; the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and World War II; the Life Saving Service and Coast Guard; coastal birds, salt marsh inhabitants, and marine life; ocean going ships and Southport’s river pilots that navigate them upriver; and the history of workboats. Sunset tours are also available.

Birding tours are good in all seasons. In winter look for gulls, ducks, and Northern Harriers that overwinter with us. During migration, you may find raptors perched on Battery Island’s trees and many varieties of shorebirds. Of course, the breeding birds mentioned above may be found year-round foraging on mudflats plus Bald Eagles and Ospreys are occasionally seen overhead.

Tours are available year-round by appointment only. For reservations call: (910) 457-5302. Also, check the Solomon T website: <http://solomontsouthport.com>.

Bon voyage! Or better yet “Yarr!”

John Ennis



The Great Egret is one of many species of waders that nest on battery Island



Blackbeard's flag (top) and Stede Bonnet's flag struck fear in the hearts of other boaters



Captain Bert helps with boarding



The Acton and Rehse families and First Mate Becky (standing)