BREAKING OUT

Lowcountry hikes are flat, but varied

By Bryce Donovan
THE POST AND COURIER

Let's be honest, when somebody says 'let's go hiking,' your first thought probably isn't of the Lowcountry. Which is fair. After all, if Mount Everest were flat the odds are pretty good that the only thing Sir Edmund Hilary would be known for is his girly last name.

But just because the terrain in the Charleston area is flat doesn't mean it isn't challenging or that it's boring. No, sir. In fact, the Lowcountry has some of the most diverse trails in the state, showcasing everything from lagoons and gigantic cypress trees to alligators and egrets. Sure there aren't any tough ascents, but there are plenty of creepy crawlies to avoid.

And isn't that challenge enough?

When the weather is favorable take to the woods of the Lowcountry and explore the great wilderness. Here are five Lowcountry trails that have a little bit of something for everyone.

Edisto Nature Trail

■ Description: Like many of the Lowcountry's trails, it doesn't take much driving to get away from all the noise and civilization. Exhibit A is the 1.5 mile Edisto Nature Trail, no more than a 40-minute drive from Charleston. Two loops give you the option of making it a one-mile hike or a one and a half.

Both wind through mature forests, swamps and atop an old railroad bed, providing a great perspective during your hike. When you arrive, keep your eyes peeled for a display containing brochures/map that will help you navigate as well as identify nearly 60 varieties of flora and fauna.

■ More info: 843-871-5000 or visit: www.sctrails-.net

Francis Beidler Forest

■ Description: If you're looking for more of a swamp walk, be sure to check out the Francis Beidler Forest. Owned and operated by the National Audubon Society, this 1.75-mile trail features a raised boardwalk through a more than 16,000-acre matrix of black water, hardwoods and gigantic bald cypress trees, some of which are more than 1,000 years old. The primary water source in the forest is Four Holes Swamp, a major tributary of the Edisto River.

Depending on the time of year you go, be sure to ask the staff about the potential for other hiking opportunities.

■ Cost: $7 for non-Audubon members, $6 for members; $3.50 for children; free for children under 6.

■ Hours: The visitor center is open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday (closed Mondays and some holidays).

■ More info: 843-462-2150 or visit: www.sc.audubon.org

Francis Marion Forest South Tibwin Trail

■ Description: One of the best parts about hiking in the Lowcountry is the variation in your surroundings. One minute, you will be walking in thick woods and the next, you are surrounded by tidal marsh. No local trail exhibits this better than the 5-mile South Tibwin Trail in McClellanville. See everything from managed wetlands to freshwater ponds along with alligators, bald eagles, ducks and hawks.

■ More info: 843-887-3257 or visit: www.fs.fed.us/r8/fms/fmarion.

Caw Caw Interpretive Center

■ Description: This historical area was once a part of several rice plantations and home to a series of rice fields sprinkled through cypress swamps. Today, you can choose from eight different trails (catering to all different hiking levels) as they meander through woods and wetlands, on grass, dirt and boardwalks. See tea plants as well as dozens of other exotic flora along with waterfowl, deer, alligators and bald eagles.

■ Cost: $1 per person. Children age 2 and younger get in free.

■ Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday; closed Monday and Tuesday.

■ More info: 843-889-8898 or visit: www.ccprc.com.

Givhans Ferry State Park

■ Description: Wildlife is teeming here, right off the bat. From hawks to gators you will likely see it here. But as you go deeper into the woods, past a small stand of cypress trees, you will notice that even the birds sound distant, leaving you alone with only the sound of the breeze rustling through the trees above.

■ Hours: Dawn to dusk.

■ More info: 843-873-0692 or visit: www.sctrails-.net