



Mammals

Armadillos

Nine-banded armadillos have spread rapidly throughout the Southeast during the last two decades and are common on Spring Island. Most scientists think that these armadillos are descendants of those that were introduced from Texas into Florida.

Armadillos have armored shells and long, plated tails and are about the size of a possum (8-17 lb). They are primarily insectivorous, feeding on insects, spiders, earthworms and occasionally small vertebrates. Armadillos have poor eyesight but an excellent sense of smell and locate their food by digging through leaf litter. Their voracious appetite for grubs, fire ants and other insects make them a beneficial pest-eating species. Unfortunately, they also tear up the ground as they search for their favorite foods and damage lawns and gardens.

Armadillos dig underground burrows up to 15' in length. These burrows are often located in the banks of ditches, under stumps or near brush piles. They also can be found under the foundations of homes. Individuals may have multiple burrows in the same vicinity. In the spring the young are born inside the burrows. The litter consists of four genetically identical offspring of the same sex (quadruplets).

Armadillo traps can be baited with over-ripe fruit or earthworms. However, armadillos will walk directly into a trap if it is placed near the burrow or along the side of a building.

Bats

Awareness of the ecological value of bats is increasing because of the huge number of mosquitoes and other insects they consume. There are at least eight species of bats in the region. Some are colonial and others are solitary. The most common colonial bats on Spring Island are the free-tailed bat and the big brown bat. The most common solitary species on Spring Island are the Seminole bat, the evening bat, the southeastern myotis and the tri-colored (or pipistrelle) bat.

Bat houses advertised in magazines are generally ineffective on Spring Island because they are easily raided by rat snakes. Wooden purple martin houses or bluebird houses on poles are considerably more effective. The favorite daytime roost for the beautiful mahogany-colored Seminole bat is among the dead fronds of a cabbage palmetto. The Trust recommends leaving dead fronds on some of your cabbage palmettos to provide habitat for these bats.

At times bats select hollow columns on the exterior of Spring Island homes as a roosting site. If the accumulation of guano within the columns causes an offensive odor, a reputable animal control company can remove the bats without killing them and plug up the entry points. This should be done in the early spring or late fall when there are not likely to be baby bats.

Deer

Quality Deer Management (QDM) maintains a healthy herd with larger bucks. QDM is a strategy that involves herd habitat, hunter management and herd monitoring. Data are collected on every deer's age, sex, body weight and antler spread (points and circumference) as well as reproductive success.

Effective QDM produces healthy deer herds that are characterized by large, mature bucks and

balanced adult sex ratios. This approach typically involves the protection of young bucks and an adequate harvest of female deer to maintain a population that is appropriate for existing habitat conditions.

Most does produce twin fawns every year because of the high quality habitat on Spring Island. Older females are harvested, allowing the younger animals to mature. This improves the social dynamics of the herd and results in larger buck size, which creates a more exciting hunting experience.

Spotlight surveys are conducted annually to estimate the herd size. The results are tabulated before targets are set for the coming year.

Fox squirrels

Fox squirrels are a very unusual species and Spring Island is fortunate to have such a large population. Size alone is all that is needed to differentiate between an adult fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*) and the common gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*). Fox squirrels can weigh more than three pounds. They exhibit a variety of color morphs from immaculate black bodies to solid gray coloration with varying

amounts of white and black on the head and tail. Most Spring Island specimens are gray and white but solid black specimens are not rare.

Fox squirrels can be found in live oak forests, pine savannas, yards and on the golf course. They may occupy a home range of 30 acres or more and feed on nuts, seeds, fruits, bird eggs and insects. They spend a great deal of time burying nuts and seeds. They often seem to forget where they hide the nuts and seeds so they are responsible for planting a lot of trees!

Mating behavior can be seen in the winter as male fox squirrels chase the females. These elaborate races involve leaping from tree to tree and racing across the ground at astonishing speed. Two to four kits are born in late February or March in a large leafy nest 30-40' off the ground. There are many nests in the trees along Mobley Oaks Lane. Older females may have two litters in a year. The babies do not open their eyes for almost a month and they stay near the nest for their first 7-8 weeks of life. The females may bear young their first year and live 10 years or more in the wild. Fox squirrel predators include bobcats, coyotes, hawks, owls and rat snakes. Drivers should take care on all roads to avoid hitting them.

Otters

Otters are mustelids, a feisty group of mammals that includes weasels, ferrets and wolverines. They are sizeable mammals that range in weight from 15 -30 pounds and in length from 4-5' long (including the tail). Males are usually much bigger than females. Their streamlined bodies and powerful limbs make them spectacular swimmers and agile hunters. They feed primarily on fish but also enjoy crayfish, crabs, frogs and snakes. They live in family groups of 5-12, hunting, playing and denning together. Otter families have sizable home ranges that encompass several square miles. They often live more than 10 years in the wild and even longer in captivity.

River otters have been on Spring Island for a very long time. Most of the otter activity takes place in the brackish/saltwater perimeter ponds like Otter and Rice Gate Ponds. These mammals spend much of their time in the salt marsh where crabs, mullet and other fish species are easily captured. Freshwater pond activity occurs mostly in the winter months when there is less food in the salt marsh.

Otters add to the value of the nature experience on Spring Island. Although otters sometimes feed on stocked fish and frolic in water features and water gardens, they are remarkable animals that certainly deserve a home on Spring Island.

Otters, eagles, herons, cormorants and mink feed on fish in our freshwater ponds. This predation by native species is a natural part of living within a nature preserve.

Underwater structures provide places for fish to hide, thereby reducing the success of otters and other predators that are hunting them. Hundreds of structures have been added to the Goose Ponds, Tabby Links Ponds and Ruins Pond to protect the fishery.

Raccoons

Most adult Spring Island raccoons weigh 10-20 pounds but some individuals can reach almost 30 pounds! They are true omnivores, feeding on a variety of berries and plants as well as insects, fish, frogs, crayfish and small mammals. Many of our resident raccoons are marsh specialists that feed on a variety of crabs and fish. Their nimble fingers and monkey-like hands help them capture anything small enough to eat. Raccoons do not actually wash their food like the species name *Procyon lotor* (“a washer”) implies. They do, however, dip prey in the water to tear them apart and remove the unwanted portions of shell, bone and feathers.

Raccoons are considered cute by many, but in reality they are fierce creatures, making a variety of growls and hisses as well as baring vicious-looking teeth. They should not be handled or approached. The bite from a raccoon is very dangerous and rabies is a possibility. While primarily nocturnal, our raccoons sometimes feed in the daytime, especially in the winter, when they can be seen foraging at low tide in the salt marsh.

Raccoons can become serious pests because of their intelligence and the dexterity of their hands. They open cabinet doors, refrigerators and other food caches. They raid trashcans and feed from pets’ bowls. They put up quite a fight if they are so inclined. They have a special fondness for corn, which makes them very unpopular with farmers.

The raccoon management approach is that there are nuisance individuals that can be removed from a residence by trapping. This should take place from September 15 – March 15 when they do not have babies back in their den, which is generally a hollow in a tree. Raccoons can be captured using a variety of live-catch traps. If released, they often return to the same spot where they were captured. It is illegal to transport raccoons from one area to another because of the chance that one might also be transporting rabies into that area. Therefore, a resident who traps a raccoon must be prepared to kill the animal humanely (by shooting, not drowning).