

# the NATURALIST CORNER

Brought to you by Peggy Potts  
Coastal Master Naturalist

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As a graduate of the Coastal Master Naturalist Program offered through the Clemson University Cooperative Extension, I would like to share my excitement and enthusiasm about the many wonders of nature that can be enjoyed and experienced in the lowcountry. Through this monthly column, I will share my observations, sightings, and characteristics about a variety of nature topics, such as common insects, migrating birds and butterflies, wildflowers and plants and more. Basically, anything in nature is fair game to learn about and explore.

I also encourage you to share your observations and experiences so that we can learn about our natural world together. Please feel free to send in pictures and/or information of anything you find interesting by emailing me, Peggy Potts, at [ppotts@charlestoncounty.org](mailto:ppotts@charlestoncounty.org).

## What's that you smell? It's Pluff Mud!!!! By: Peggy Potts



Oh the sweet aroma of pluff mud! It is the gooey, oozy, gray, thick essence of the lowcountry. It is the result of a nutrient rich ecosystem. It comes from the decaying grasses in the marsh and

contains the decaying parts of fish, crabs, shrimp, and other material that wildlife depends upon. The marsh itself consists of smooth cord grass—spartina— that creates a unique habitat. The thick blades secrete salt and makes it ideal for withstanding the extreme lowcountry heat.

The pluff mud prevents large animals from consuming the living stalks so the grass can die back each fall allowing bacteria to decompose into a rich substance. It creates the productive salt marsh food, and the constant currents of the tides replenish the soil nutrients.

According to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, salt marshes rank among the most productive ecosystems on earth. Many species of birds feed on the abundance of small fish and invertebrates that live in the salt marsh. Herons, egrets and ibises feed on fish, shrimp and fiddler crabs. And, offshore species spend all or part of their lives in the waters around the salt marshes,

making this habitat critical to our coastal environment. The pluff mud is the important ingredient that makes it all work.

Some say the name “pluff mud” comes from the sound it makes when you step into it. It has a vacuum effect that pulls you deeper down the harder you try to free yourself. It is so thick that once you step into it and then attempt to pull yourself out, you might find that your shoes are missing.

The smell of the pluff mud may be it's most defining feature. Some folks find the smell of the mud offensive or foul. Those folks, in Gullah terms, might be considered as *comyas* (folks that have come here from other places). But to the “*binyas*,” (folks that have been here) the smell is heaven itself. The *binyas* happily inhale the sweet salty smell as they approach the marsh either in a car with rolled down windows or on foot to take in the view. To them, the aroma improves their mood and restores them with a sense of physical well-being. It is not only a symbol of the lowcountry and the merging of life and death in the salt marshes—to many locals, it is also a symbol of home.



### Charleston County Greenbelt Program

There are many greenbelt properties where you can view a beautiful salt marsh, but one in particular is Dupre Island which is accessible by boat. The Greenbelt Program provided funding for this property which is part of the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge. When you visit, take a picture and post it to Instagram using the hashtag #ccgreenbelt and you can earn “Lifestyle Loot” through the County Wellness Program.