



## Hammock Archaeology

By Matthew Napolitano

You could call it “archaeology without borders.” For the first time since the 1970’s, the hammocks of St. Catherines Island are the focus of archaeological study. For his master’s thesis, Matthew Napolitano of the University of West Florida and the American Museum of Natural History led a crew of archaeologists to Bull Island Hammock, which is between the mainland and St. Catherines Island.

Hammocks, also known as marsh islands or back-barrier islands, are dry upland sections in the marsh that support a variety of plants including some that are not found on St. Catherines Island.

Of St. Catherines numerous hammocks, only five are located between the Intracoastal waterway and the mainland. Three of the forested hammocks are associated with Bull Island, and two with Moss Island. Even though Bull Island and Moss Island are separate marsh islands, they are part of the St. Catherines Island property which was awarded to Mary Musgrove as part of the King’s Grant.

The goal of the survey was to determine whether the models of Native American occupation of St. Catherines Island established by David Hurst Thomas extend to the hammocks. Shell deposits, like the ones seen on St. Catherines Island are present out on the ham-



Brian Miller and Hannah Morris hard at work

mocks. What were they doing out there and how does this play in to what we know about the St. Catherines Island economy over time?

Workdays started with about a 15 minute boat ride out to the hammock. Once we arrived to the drop off point, there was about a ¼ mile hike through the marsh to the hammock itself. Some days, this required the crew to practically swim through thigh-high water or to crawl through soft marsh mud. Days were spent digging shovel test pits every 20 meters, bagging up artifacts, and collecting and weighing shell samples.

While artifact analysis is ongoing, we know from the ceramics recovered that humans have been visiting Bull Island Hammock for as long as there were people on St. Catherines. We recovered Late Archaic ceramics, the oldest kind found in North America, as well as mission period ceramics that date to the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. Next, stable isotope and radiocarbon data from shell samples will help shed light on the specific cultural periods and seasons that the hammock was utilized.

I would like to extend a big thanks to the St. Catherines Island Foundation and its staff who helped to make this fieldwork possible. None of this could have happened without your help!

Chester DePratter and Matt Napolitano discussing ceramics in the St. Catherines Archaeology Lab. Photo by Hannah Morris





Chuck Lambert, an Augusta State University volunteer and alumnus, sorts anchovies and inland silversides seined off St. Catherines Island, Ga.

## Fish and History from Chuck Lambert and Rob Pavey

The following is from an article which was published in our local Augusta paper which we thought the readers of the "No Wake Zone" might enjoy. Mr. Pavey is a reporter and not a scientist so he might not always get it quite right or include all of what is said. One point in particular we felt he should have included was a heartfelt "Thank You" to Dr. Betsy Reitz (archaeologist) for giving us the opportunity to work with her and for opening our eyes to the endless opportunities to tie our research to other disciplines. It should also be noted that the "We" includes Dr. Gwen Carroll and Jason Moak who have been an integral part of the project since the beginning. While it may not be accurate this article does get science in the news, hope you enjoy!

In the beginning, Bruce Saul never dreamed his monthly fishing trips could help unlock the mysteries of prehistoric man. What began as an effort to write a book on the area's fish evolved into an ongoing program. Additionally his research has helped archaeologists with their studies of coastal Indian tribes of long ago.

"My project is categorizing fishes along the coast and St. Catherines Island, and they examine the ones we catch and compare them to bones found in middens," he said. The middens, or shell mounds, were prehistoric man's equivalent of today's landfill ~ and contain discarded evidence of island life dating back almost 4,000 years. "We've been collecting fishes for them off and on since 1996," he said. "Now we're in

year 14, and we try to do it three days a month."

Much of the fish collecting is accomplished with seines operated by students and volunteers. So far, the groups have caught and identified more than 100 species.

The archeologists' findings indicate early man pursued many of today's favorite sportfish and baitfish ~ and were quite accomplished at catching them.

"The top thing they are finding is trout, and right there with trout is mullet," he said. "Then there are some of the things that are almost as common: croaker, various types of drum ~ and catfish." One of the surprises was the presence of garfish remains in almost every site, despite the island's distance from the fish's freshwater habitat. "I would have never guessed gar," Saul said. "Ninety percent of the middens they have checked have them, and we're still trying to figure that out." The toothy fish typically live in freshwater or brackish areas closer to the mainland. "We wondered if the island, that long ago, was bigger, and may have had fresh or brackish water somewhere."

Saul's project is funded by the St. Catherines Island Foundation and administered through the American Museum of Natural History ~ whose curator, David Hearst Thomas, has studied the island, located about 50 miles south of Savannah, for decades.

Top10 fishes known from prehistory: from *Source: Archaeological explorations of shell middens along coastal Georgia*

- 1-2: Trout and mullet (tie)
- 3: Gar
- 4-5: Croaker and drum (tie)
- 6-7: Catfish and flounder (tie)
- 8-9-10: Sheepshead, poagies and menhaden (tie)

**Southern Blue Flag Iris** (*Iris virginica*) is a tall, bold perennial plant with a purple, white, and yellow flower and pale-green sword-like leaves in strong flat vertical bands. This wildflower occurs from Virginia to S. Florida in the south and Texas in the West (see map). It is commonly found growing in wet ditches, swamps, wet meadows, freshwater marshes, stream edges and lake/pond shores. On St. Catherines it is found in the swampy area along King New Ground Rd.

The Cherokee and other tribes in the southeastern United States are known to have used this wildflower for its medicinal properties. The root was pounded into a paste that was used as a salve for skin. An infusion made from the root was used to treat ailments of the liver, and a decoction of root was used to treat "yellowish urine." Iris (mostly European) rhizomes are harvested & dried ( a process which allows the fats & oils inside the roots to undergo degradation and oxidation), which produces many fragrant compounds that are valuable in perfumery. The scent is said to be similar to violets. On St. Catherines Island we simply enjoy seeing it in the spring.

