

NORTH CAROLINA COASTAL FEDERATION

2012

OUR COAST

THE COASTAL ROAD LESS TRAVELED:
a travel guide with a conscience

OUR COAST

NCCF is a non-profit tax-exempt organization dedicated to involving citizens in decisions about managing coastal resources. Its aim is to share technical information and resources to better represent current and long-term economic, social and environmental interests of the North Carolina Coast.

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The North Carolina Coastal Federation is located on Highway 24 in Ocean, N.C., between Swansboro and Morehead City. Our offices, nature library and shop are open Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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Photo by Sam Bland

Most of us long for greener pasture from time to time. It's easy to take the places we live for granted.

A few years ago I was in the San Juan Islands in Washington State for a meeting on Orcas Island. You get there by ferries, and like most tourists I passed time on the ride to the island reading tourist brochures.

These pamphlets invited me to nice drive-by beaches and vistas, and to buy overpriced ice cream and meals.

Guidebooks typically locate places everyone visits. They're pretty sketchy when it comes to helping us get away from the beaten trail and find more pristine and out-of-the-way places to experience.

On this trip a local environmental group hosted my meeting. It arranged visits with local people and to special places tourists miss. By talking with residents and seeing places they go, it helped me to understand why people are enticed to make their lives in that part of the world.

It was on that trip that *Our Coast* was hatched. What we needed, I concluded, was a publication that would help visitors and residents learn how to celebrate the rich natural and cultural heritage of the N.C. coast. We tried with our annual *State of the Coast Report* in 2010. It was so well received that we decided to launch *Our Coast* this year as an annual summer publication.

Experiencing the best parts of our coast is a lifelong endeavor. There's a huge diversity of people and places to get to know, and many parts of this dynamic world are constantly changing. This means that repeated visits to the same places are worthwhile and intellectually stimulating.

For instance, I spend several dozen days a year messing around Bogue Inlet. It's different every time I go back, and sometimes the change is dramatic. This causes me a sense of amazement each time I'm there, especially when I run hard aground where only a week before there was plenty of deep water. It's as if I'm visiting the inlet for the first time every time I return.

So when you get bored playing putt-putt golf or sitting on a crowded beach, *Our Coast* invites you to experience the parts of our coast that inspire us here at the federation every day. None of the federation staff would be around very long if all we did was focus on problems. Instead, each of us rekindles our enthusiasm for our work by taking time to visit and enjoy the coast. Special places and people energize and motivate us to do our work.

This publication is designed to provide you with a tool for learning how to celebrate our coast's rich natural and cultural heritage. We believe that the more you experience this side of the coast, the more you'll love it and the harder you'll work to protect and restore it.

Todd Miller

A Travel Guide With a Conscience

We here at the N.C. Coastal Federation don't view the coast as a museum artifact under glass — something to be viewed but not touched. We want people to enjoy the beauty of our coast. We want them to marvel at its magnificent sunsets, to eat the bounty that its waters provide. We want them to paddle down a quiet river, boat out to offshore fishing grounds or hike through a stately longleaf pine forest, looking for birds or, yes, even a deer or bear to shoot. We also want people to make their livings off our coast.

But we hope that they will do all that responsibly, in ways that don't threaten our coast's natural health and productivity.

This new annual publication, *Our Coast*, will offer a few possibilities. It's a travel guide of sorts, but it's not like the dozens of others that you can pick up this summer in stands from Corolla to Calabash. Call it a travel guide with a conscience.

We've broken the coast into three sections — Northeast, Central and Southeast. In each section, you'll find a map and a list of places to visit. Many of the places share a similar story. They were once threatened by development and are now protected because people fought for them. In the case of Bird Island near Sunset Beach, for instance, the fight lasted for a decade and enlisted the aid of thousands of people across the state. Tiny Permuda Island in Onslow County was saved because of the indomitable will of one woman, Lena Ritter, who organized her fellow fishermen. (We're not opting for the politically correct "fisher" here because Lena would have none of that.)

Fishermen also figured heavily in driving strip miners from the peninsula between the Pamlico River and Albemarle Sound. You can now visit the land that was destined to be open sores. Much of the proposed mining lands have been preserved in some of the wildest wildlife refuges in the country.

Even North Carolina's most famous sand dune, Jockey's Ridge, owes its existence as a natural area to a conservation heroine, Carolista Fletcher Baum Golden. In 1973 when the ridge was slated for development, Golden took that

most radical of conservation steps: She stood in front of a bulldozer that was preparing to carve a chunk out of the dune.

These are inspiring stories that often get overlooked in the tourist brochures and magazines. They shouldn't be forgotten, because they provide a valuable lesson in conservation. People of goodwill and good sense can win. If they band together and fight hard enough and long enough, they overcome powerful economic and political forces to protect the places they treasure. And the places they treasure can go on to become economic forces of their own in terms of tourism and fishing.

Other stories, like the Holly Shelter Game Land in Pender County and Pungo Lake in Tyrrell County, are just neat places to visit that aren't often featured in publications but offer visitors special experiences. Wildflower are the showcase in Holly Shelter and tundra swans at Pungo Lake.

If you're here visiting, take a break from the crowds at the beach and spend a day seeing if the fuss was worth it. If you're a resident, take a weekend drive to visit the legacy your fellow coastal residents left behind.

We also hope that visiting the places listed on the following pages will give you an appreciation for our coast's stunning natural heritage and a desire to step lightly. We would like *Our Coast* to also accent the point made by Carl Berling's N.C. Coastal Federation license plate. Carl, a member from Charlotte, sent us a picture of his a kayak trip on the Black River. The picture shows Carl's vehicle sporting a "4Fun" federation plate. Carl explains that the federation's work to protect and preserve the special places along our coast enhance his chances to enjoy our coast.

We would add that we can't do it alone. As this publication shows, it often takes the determined efforts of thousands of people.

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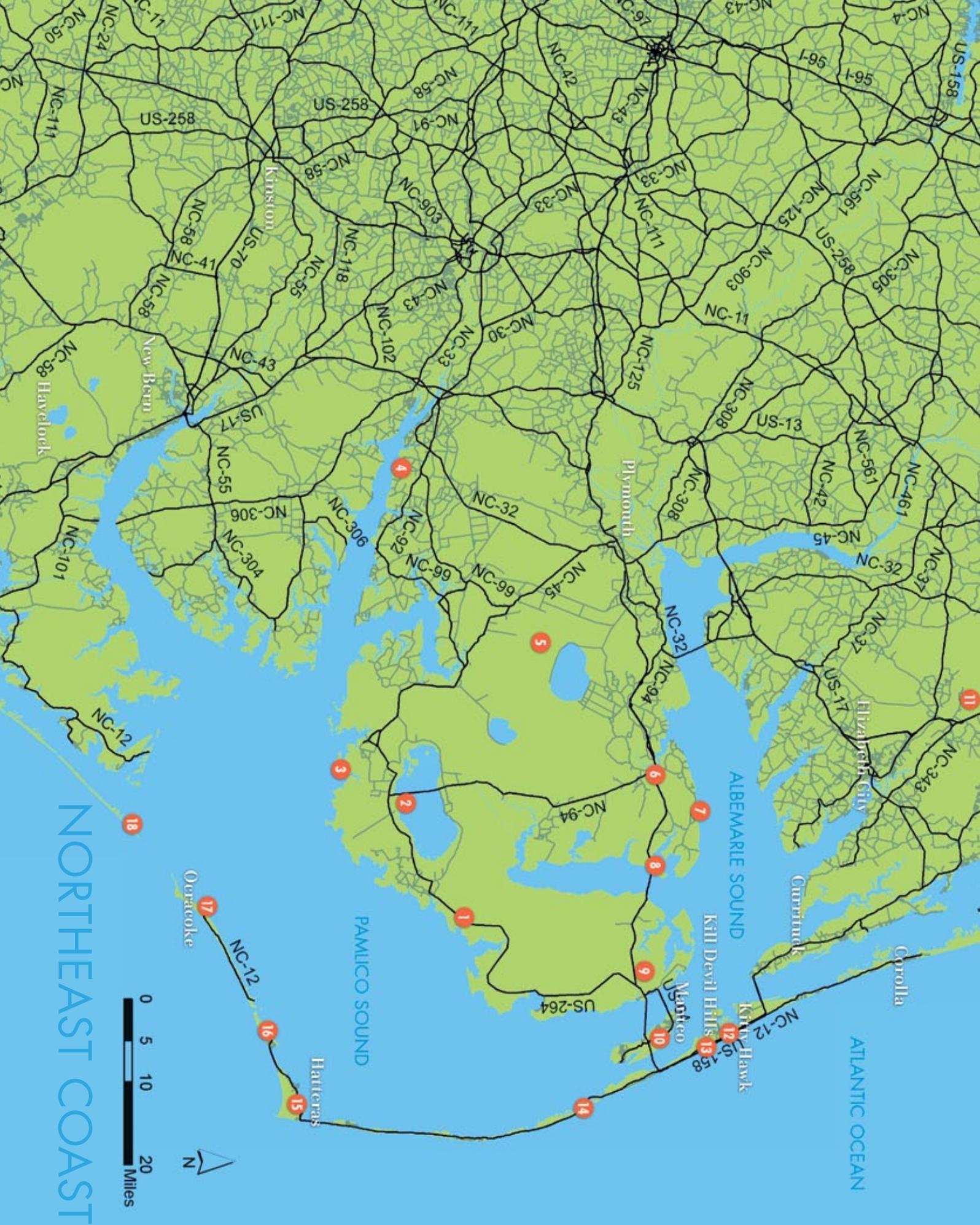
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Sneads Ferry. Photo by Deb Bettini



NORTHEAST COAST



NORTHEAST COAST:

Proposed Peat Mining Lands Become Wild Refuges

Just west of the Outer Banks, the shores of the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds are coated with a thick brown hash of mud, muck and decaying plants and trees—organic peat.

In boggy areas the peat is overgrown with sphagnum moss and a shrubby hedge so dense that a person dropped into its midst wouldn't be able to see five feet. The name given to this country is *pocosin*, an Algonquin Indian word

that means “the swamp on a hill.”

It's the kind of place long thought to be worthless and long treated as such.

But in the late 1970s, entrepreneurs found a way to wring some economic value out of the region's pocosins. A company named Peat Methanol Associates applied for state permits to strip the peat soils off the land and burn them to create methanol.

Without herculean efforts on the part of the N.C. Coastal Federation, other conserva-



tion groups and many local people, much of the Albemarle Pamlico region would have become a coastal strip mine. Instead, much of that land was eventually protected, making Washington, Tyrrell, Dare and Hyde counties home to a collection of refuges and preserves that make the counties among the wildest areas in eastern North America—wild enough to hold rare red wolves.

What better introduction could visitors have to a coast known for its storms, shipwrecks, and culture of hardy individualism?

WILDLIFE REFUGES

Home to a melee of plants and animals, pocosins are beautiful, diverse and fascinating—but also buggy and inhospitable. They're quintessential wild North Carolina. Scientists estimate that 70 percent of the pocosins found in the U.S. are in the Tar Heel State.

Here are some businesses to visit that will give you a taste of the culture and heritage of the northeastern coast.

THE ALBATROSS FLEET (MAP #16)

Hatteras, a small village at the tip of Hatteras Island, is home to a colorful commercial and charter fishing fleet, including the first charter fishing boat brought to the Outer Banks in 1937. The Albatross I, II and III boats are still fished by Capt. Ernie Foster.

Charter a boat to The Point, one of the best offshore fishing areas in the western Atlantic—and the site where oil companies launched an unsuccessful bid to drill for oil and natural gas. If you can't go to sea, watch the boats bring in their catches in late afternoon.

For more information: www.albatrossfleet.com.

ALLIGATOR RIVER GROWERS (MAP #1)

You've not had an onion until you've tasted a Mattamuskeet Sweet grown on this family farm near Englehard. Visitors are encouraged at the farm where other produce is sold. During the season, special hand-selected onions can be shipped in 10- and 40-pound cartons to virtually any place in the world.

For more information: www.alligatorrivergrowers.com

OCRACOKE FISH HOUSE AND WATERMEN'S MUSEUM (MAP #17)

In 2006 the last fish house on Ocracoke went up for sale, threatening the survival of the island's centuries-old fishing culture. The nonprofit Ocracoke Foundation was formed to obtain grants to buy the fish house, and a Working Watermen's Association now operates the for-profit Ocracoke Seafood Co. The Foundation has also established a Working Watermen's Exhibit in another former fish house. Watch the boats unload their catch and buy fresh local crabs, shrimp and fish at the Seafood Company and browse the exhibits at the Watermen's Museum.

For more information: www.ocracokewatermen.org

POCOSIN ARTS (MAP #6)

This nonprofit arts cooperative in downtown Columbia has a gallery with local arts and crafts, many for sale. It offers workshops, classes and retreats and brings in visiting artists for demonstrations.

This is eastern North Carolina's premier hand-crafts education center. Browse through the gallery, make a clay tile or watch visiting artist Marlene True (at the cooperative this fall) craft pairs of earrings from recycled aluminum cans.

For more information: www.pocosinarts.org



FULL CIRCLE SEAFOOD MARKET (MAP #8)

Owned by long-time coastal advocate Willy Phillips, this shop on the eastern edge of Columbia offers the freshest local catch, along with the house specialty, smoked bluefish, and crab cakes made locally. In season it also sells local produce. Ask for a peek at the shedders, where crabs are held until they molt and can be sold as soft shells. There's also a wind turbine, which Willy will gladly show off.

For more information: (252) 796-9696



Hyde County. Photo by Christine Miller

In a rural region hungry for jobs, Peat Methanol's proposal to build a peat-burning plant in Tyrrell County was welcome news.

There was only one problem: Stripping off the peat would rob the soils of their ability to absorb rain. Stormwater would course into the estuaries, carrying with it sediments, bacteria and pollution.

In 1982 the federation started working with volunteers to reach out to local fishermen about the dangers posed by peat mining. Fishermen already knew that draining the swamps would hurt fishing, but they weren't aware of the plans to strip mine and harvest 120,000 acres of peat. The federation not only spread awareness about the peat mining proposals, but it then worked closely with the local community to derail those plans.

It was the federation's first big battle, and it attracted wide attention. Local watermen squared off against some local officials and business boosters. In the end, Peat Methanol Associates failed to get the permits needed to harvest the peat.

About 93,000 acres of prime pocosin went on the auction block. The Richard King Mellon Foundation bought the property on behalf of the Conservation Fund.

That land now forms the core of the 110,000-acre [POCOSIN LAKES NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE \(MAP #5\)](#), home to endangered red wolves and a host of birds, reptiles and mammals. The refuge headquarters has helped transform the rural town of Columbia into a center for ecotourism.

Just to the east lies the 10,000-acre [PALMETTO-PEARTREE PRESERVE \(MAP #7\)](#), set aside by the Conservation Fund as habitat for

threatened red-cockaded woodpeckers.

Continuing toward the coast, across the drawbridge on U.S. 64 you'll find the [ALLIGATOR RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE \(MAP #9\)](#) spanning 28 miles north to south and 15 miles east to west. This refuge was established in 1984 through a land deal brokered by The Nature Conservancy.

In 1987, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released eight red wolves on the Alligator River refuge. The release capped a decades-long search for a place large enough to re-establish a healthy Eastern wolf population.

The wolves fanned out across the region, hunting and breeding in the mix of fields, woods and pocosins. By last spring the wolf population, adults and pups, had grown to about 120.

Red wolves are secretive animals, and sightings are rare. Visitors are much more likely to hear them during the refuge's howling safaris. But with luck visitors will see black bears, deer, and an abundance of birds, especially in the winter when thousands of waterfowl congregate on the Pocosin Lakes and Alligator River refuges and, in Hyde County, the Mattamuskeet and



Swan Quarter wildlife refuges.

Set aside for wildlife in the 1930s, the 50,000-acre [MATTAMUSKEET \(MAP #2\)](#) and 16,400-acre [SWAN QUARTER \(MAP #3\)](#) refuges faced a serious threat in 2004, when the Navy announced plans to build an outlying landing field (OLF) nearby. Pilots would have made thousands of touch-and-go landings, practicing for maneuvers with aircraft carriers at sea. The Swan Quarter refuge includes a waterfront dock that's a great place to gain access to Pamlico Sound or just stop for quick walk or picnic.

The field would have been close enough to the wildlife refuges to disturb bird populations and the resulting bird strikes would have been hazardous to pilots. In the face of fierce opposition from residents and environmentalists, the Navy dropped its plans in 2007.

Defeat of the OLF preserved the natural beauty of the Albemarle Pamlico region. It's remote and still buggy, but well worth exploring on your way to the more famous islands of the Outer Banks.



A sun-dappled trail in Nags Head Woods.

NAGS HEAD WOODS (MAP #12)

Just off the crowded business district of Kill Devil Hills, a residential street climbs a dune and drops into a diverse deciduous forest called Nags Head Woods. It's not the kind of place you'd expect to find on a barrier island. Tall ridges with dogwoods, oaks, and beeches drop precipitously into beautiful ponds. The forest owes its existence to the surrounding dunes that protect it from salty maritime winds.

If developers had gotten their way in the late 1970s, the forest would have been clear-cut and the dunes pushed into the ponds, leveling the ground for a residential subdivision. The development process was well underway when area resident Henrietta List formed a grassroots group to save the woods. A road had been cut through and fire hydrants installed.

Thanks to List's efforts, The Nature Conservancy bought the 1,100 acres of the forest and named it the Nags Head Woods Ecological Preserve. The Conservancy built a small visitors center and trails where visitors can hike, watch birds and participate in programs.

The Conservancy also helped preserve Run Hill, the great but little known sand dune north of the woods. Run Hill's bulk protects the woods. Some of the greatest diversity in the forest is on the dune's southwest side. But the dune is actively migrating, burying trees as it goes.

JOCKEY'S RIDGE (MAP #13)

A bit further south, the region's most famous dune, Jockey's Ridge, owes its existence as a natural area to another Outer Banks conservation heroine, Carolista Fletcher Baum Golden. In 1973 when the ridge was slated for development, Golden took that most radical of conservation steps: She stood in front of a bulldozer that was preparing to carve a chunk out of the dune. The state subsequently obtained 426 acres through purchase and land donations and established Jockey's Ridge State Park in 1975.

At 110 feet, Jockey's Ridge was once the tallest dune on the East Coast. But the supply of loose sand that once blew inland from the

beach neighborhoods disappeared as land was paved and planted with grass. Since the 1980s the height of the dune has shrunk to 79 feet.

When you visit the park, make sure to walk back to its sound side. That's where the federation is working with the park to restore salt marsh. You'll see an oyster bag sill and marsh plants there.

BUXTON WOODS (MAP #15)

South of Oregon Inlet in the crook of Hatteras Island, much of what is now the Buxton Woods portion of the N.C. Coastal Reserve was once slated to become a golfing community. In 1985 developers proposed building a 163-acre golf course and houses in the midst of the 3,000-acre maritime forest—the largest such woodland system in the state.

The plan appalled a number of local residents, who formed a grassroots group called the Friends of Hatteras Island, which worked closely with the federation. They were worried about saving more than trees and underbrush.

Maritime forests are characterized by dense, salt-pruned foliage that forms a protective cover over shady undergrowth. The forest holds moisture and allows it to seep into the water table. Hydrologists warned that cutting the forest would put the Buxton aquifer and the

public drinking supply at risk.

Members of the Friends of Hatteras discovered an old map showing that the golf course would have infringed on a state-designated Area of Environmental Concern that included land set aside for an expansion of the public water well field. The discovery effectively killed the golf course.

The state bought the property, creating the Buxton Woods tract of the N.C. Coastal Reserve. The reserve now contains 968 acres and includes several hiking trails.

The Buxton Woods ecosystem suffered major damage in 1993 from Hurricane Emily. Hundreds of loblolly pines were broken off. Others were killed during an ensuing outbreak of pine bark beetles.

Although the snags are unsightly, the pine canopy is slowly being replaced by oak and cedar, the natural progression for a barrier island forest.

"Quite often people don't realize the amount of effort that's involved, or how incredibly complicated the process can be," said David Owens, director of the state Division of Coastal Management during the fight to save Buxton Woods. "When a community group does manage to preserve a natural area, it's a real triumph."

OTHER PLACES WORTH A LOOK

Here are other places along the northeast coast that are worth a visit.

DISMAL SWAMP STATE PARK (MAP #11)

The park in Camden County opened in 2008 and marked the first time that public access to the Great Dismal Swamp was made possible in North Carolina. Features of the park include the historic Dismal Swamp Canal, which is used regularly by boaters, and almost 17 miles of logging trails open to hiking and mountain biking through swamp forests. Be on the lookout for butterflies, which are plentiful at the park. Forty-three species have been found here. Several varieties of warbler and vireo are common. Woodpeckers and hawks nest here as do barred owls.

For more information:
www.ncparks.gov/Visit/parks/disw/main.php

GOOSE CREEK STATE PARK (MAP #4)

Giant old oaks draped in Spanish moss welcome you to this special world where broad, lazy Goose Creek joins the Pamlico River. A primitive camping area, picnic sites, swim beach and hiking and paddling trails offer a variety of ways to savor the tranquil surroundings at Goose Creek

State Park, which is in historic Bath and the original Washington.

For more information:
www.ncparks.gov/Visit/parks/gocr/main.php

N.C. COASTAL FEDERATION OFFICE (MAP #10)

Come by the federation's regional office in Manteo to visit our rain gardens and the stormwater park that is adjacent to the office.

For information: www.nccoast.org

PEA ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE (MAP #14)

If you want to see the forces of global warming at work, visit this 5,800-acre refuge at the northern tip of Hatteras Island. Here, playing out in real time, is one scenario for the future. To protect the bridge over Oregon Inlet and the roads leading to it and to keep the navigation channel in the inlet open, the state has been waging an

ever intensifying battle with the sea for more than 20 years. It has spent tens of millions of dollars during that time building and maintaining a small jetty at the inlet, dredging sand from the channel and pumping it on the beach, relocating the highway and armoring the beach with massive sand bags. An army of bulldozers stands ready to push sand off the road and plug holes in the fragile sand dunes every time the ocean breaches the defenses. If the rate of sea-level rise triples this century because of global warming, as many scientists forecast, this scene could be repeated all over our coast.

For more information: 252-473-1131;
www.fws.gov/peaisland/

PORTSMOUTH VILLAGE (MAP #18)

Step back in time and visit this historic fishing and shipping village on the north end of Portsmouth Island. The village was founded in 1753 and largely abandoned after a series of hurricanes at the turn of the 20th century. The last resident left in 1971. The site and buildings became part of Cape Lookout National Seashore five years later and are now on the National Register of Historic Places. Private ferries from Ocracoke will take you to the village.

For more information: www.nps.gov/cal/index.htm



Tundra swans glide over Pungo Lake as the setting sun casts a golden shine on the clouds. Photo by Sam Bland.

A WILDLIFE SPECTACLE AT PUNGO LAKE

BY SAM BLAND

Many coastal N.C. residents are unaware that a great wildlife spectacle occurs each winter, just a day trip away.

Tens of thousands of ducks, snow geese and tundra swans navigate the Atlantic Flyway and begin arriving in November at Pungo Lake in the [POCOSIN LAKES NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE \(MAP #5\)](#) in Hyde, Tyrrell and Washington counties. That's why when the Navy wanted to build a practice field nearby residents and bird lovers rose up to stop it. Protest signs sprouted in front of area homes and businesses. Lawsuits were filed and permits challenged. The Navy finally backed down in 2008. The birds were safe.

BEST VIEWING SPOTS

Once you find your way to the refuge, you must navigate a maze of dirt roads to find the five wildlife observation areas, three of which offer good views of Pungo Lake. It's really just a large, shallow depression that was created long ago when a ground fire burned the thick, peat-rich soil. Rainfall then filled the hole to create the 2,800-acre lake.

One of the best spots to view some of the 25,000 tundra swans or 100,000 snow geese that migrate here is from the south lake platform on the Charles Kuralt Trail. The trail

honors the N.C. native who brought these special places into our homes with his "On the Road" TV segments on CBS news.

From this elevated platform, you can lose track of time just watching the swans take off and gracefully land on the glassy lake surface as they come from and go to the feeding sites in the nearby fields. Farmers are allowed to grow crops in the refuge but are required to leave 20 percent of their harvest behind for the birds and other wildlife.

The large, white, 20-pound swans use

the lake as their roosting site for resting and sleeping. Floating out on the lake at night provides a safe buffer from predators. Here they will rest and try to fatten up for the long spring migration back to the breeding grounds on the arctic tundra of Alaska and northern Canada.

Just a short drive down the dusty road is the Duck Pen Wildlife Trail that leads to the Pungo Lake Observation Point. A blind provides excellent concealment allowing you to see a variety ducks. As you walk down the trail you will notice that the surrounding land is quite

An adult black bear and two cubs feed in a field. Photo by Sam Bland.





Red-winged blackbirds, spooked by a soaring bald eagle, darken the sky. Photo by Sam Bland.

wet with standing water. This is a pocosin, the Native American word for “swamp on a hill.” This bog is thick with evergreen shrubs such as wax myrtle, sweet bay and red bay with a few pine trees scattered around.

A FAVORITE HIKE

One of my favorite activities at Pungo Lake is to take a hike down the North Lake Road. On the south side of the road is a wide swath of thick woodland that borders the lake. On the north side of the road, farm fields with food plots stretch out into the distance. As I headed down the road, I flushed out two bald eagles, one mature and one an adolescent, that were perched in the tall gum trees. They flew out over the fields and began gaining altitude until they were soaring high into the blue sky. The soaring eagles flushed thousands of red-winged blackbirds feeding in the fields. They rose in a dark cloud and buzzed about like a pulsating orb before settling back to the ground.

As I continued to walk, the air was quiet except for the occasional piercing cry of a red-tailed hawk and the laughing call of a pileated woodpecker. After about two miles, I finally came across evidence of an animal that I wanted to see. Huge muddy paw prints and island-sized piles of scat were scattered about, indicating black bears were nearby. Just off of the trail that leads to the north side observation area I saw a number of bear and deer trails

and found a spot to hunker down and wait for a sighting. Alas, it was not to be.

With the sun setting, I headed back to my truck since there was one more stop I wanted to make. Racing the sun, I swiftly walked the muddy road bed in a bit of a funk since I hadn't seen any bear. I've always seen bear from this road. This area has probably the greatest concentration of black bear in the state, and I was skunked.

Almost to the truck, I took a glance across one of the farm fields with a food plot. Off in the distance I could see three black objects, one large and two small, slowly moving about. A check with the binoculars revealed an adult bear with two cubs. They weren't as close as I would have liked but they stayed out in the open for some great looks.

With a shot of excitement from the bears, I drove back to the observation platform for my favorite part of the trip. As a gate of darkness began to lower toward the horizon, the tundra swans were flowing back to the security of the lake. Their bodies were dark silhouettes against a golden-hued sky that was changing colors as the last light of the day was fading away. I could hear the wind rushing over their wings as the swans passed overhead. They glided in and skidded on their big webbed feet, landing softly onto the dead slick calm lake water. The cold evening air was now filled with the soft cooing and honking of their magical calls as they

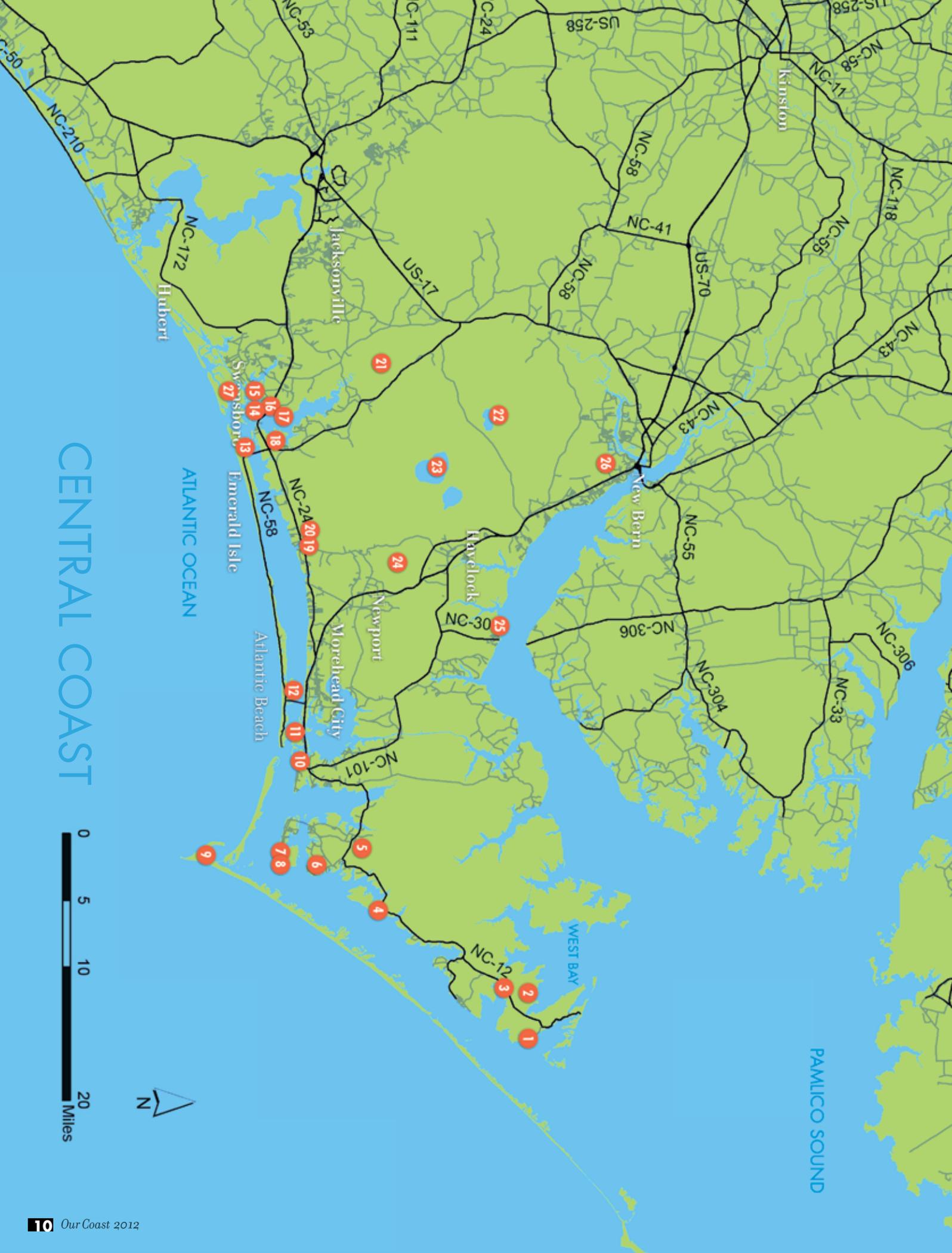
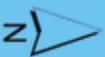


settled in for the night.

TO GET THERE: The refuge is six miles south of Columbia off N.C. 94 on the east and 18 miles south of Plymouth off N.C. 45 on the west. There are several access points to the refuge. Pungo Lake can be accessed by taking N.C. 45 South to Pantego.

Sam Bland spent much of his life out in the field as a park ranger and park superintendent at the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. Most of his 30 years with the division was spent at Hammocks Beach State Park near Swansboro where Sam specialized in resource management and environmental education. He joined the N.C. Coastal Federation in 2009.

CENTRAL COAST





CENTRAL COAST:

White Oak River. Photo by Collette Dilworth

White Oak River Yields Its Treasures Easily

Come spend some time with the White Oak River.

Come paddle it on a still morning as the first soft orange light of the new day breaks above the far tree line.

Come walk along it as the schools of baby mullets skitter along the bank at your feet and their larger relatives break the distant water in a series of joyous leaps.

Come sit by it to watch the heron patiently stalk the mud flats and the red-tailed hawk soar high above, spreading its great wings to gracefully catch the breeze.

Leave the beach chairs and that trashy paperback novel. Leave the crowds baking on blankets on the hot sand. And come spend some time with the White Oak. It will be good for your soul.

The predominantly black water river meanders for 48 miles through Jones, Carteret and Onslow counties along the central coast, gradually widening as it flows past Swansboro and into the sea.

It drains almost 12,000 acres of estuaries — saltwater marshes lined with cordgrass, impenetrable freshwater swamps and rare stands of red cedar that are flooded with wind tides. In the narrow upper portion of the river, the alligators may actually outnumber the people. The wider and saltier lower section was

so renowned for fat oysters and clams that in times past competing watermen came to blows over its bounty at places that now bear names like Battleground Rock.

To keep the river this way, the N.C. Coastal Federation has joined with state agencies to buy and preserve more than 4,000 acres along the river. It has partnered with local towns to improve the quality of its water, and thousands of people volunteer their time each year to restore the river's marshes and oyster beds.

Two recreation areas in the 160,000-acre [CROATAN NATIONAL FOREST \(MAP #24\)](#), which covers much of the river's eastern side, are good jumping off points to explore the river's two distinctly different faces.

The [HAYWOOD LANDING RECREATION AREA \(MAP #21\)](#) on N.C. 58 south of Maysville offers a glimpse of a river that few people see. Here you can launch your canoe, kayak or shallow-draft boat to explore the freshwater



Blue crabs. Photo by Sam Bland, NCCF

Here are some businesses to visit that will give you a taste of the culture and heritage of the central coast.

CLYDE PHILLIPS SEAFOOD (MAP #16)

The pink and white building between the bridges heading into Swansboro is among the last of its kind. Waterfront seafood markets like this are fast disappearing all along the N.C. coast. Rising costs, declining seafood prices and the high value of waterfront property are combining to threaten the very existence of the traditional seafood market. Clyde Phillips is the last one in Swansboro, which was once known as a fishing center.

Here you'll find shrimp, live blue crabs and local fish species, such as Virginia mullet, striped mullet and red drum, that are almost impossible to find short of catching them yourself. All come from Clyde's boats, which are tied up at the dock behind the store, or bought from local commercial fishermen. Go by and watch Vernon expertly fillet a fish. He's been doing it for almost 50 years.

For more information: 910-326-4468

CORE SOUND WATERFOWL MUSEUM AND HERITAGE CENTER (MAP #7)

Any exploration of Down East Carteret County begins here. The museum at the end of the road on Harkers Island has new exhibit halls and striking displays of the traditional craft of decoy carving. Each of the 13 small communities that make up Down East also has its own exhibit. It's there that you can look through family scrapbooks, letters and photographs and get a real feel for the culture of the region.

For more information: 252-728-1500;
www.coresound.com

DAVIS SHORE PROVISIONS GENERAL STORE (MAP #4)

Like any general store in any small, rural community in North Carolina, Johnny's Store in Davis was the center of life. But Johnny's closed years ago, leaving a hole in community life. Kim and Mack Overby are trying to plug it. They bought the old store three years ago, remodeled it and brought it back to life, replicating as close as possible the atmosphere of a general store of bygone times. Johnny would probably shake his head at the frappes and espresso bar, but times change.

The Overbys have tried to make the store a part of the community again. They sell the wares of local artists and craftsmen. They invite local farmers to sell their produce in their parking lot and have Pizer — that's "porch" for you people who ain't from around here — Sings in the summer with local gospel and bluegrass groups.

"We have a lot of respect for the culture and value of Down East," said Kim, who grew up in Johnston County, "because we came from a place that lost all that."

For more information: 252-729-0011;
www.davisshoreprovisions.com

river by water. You'll quickly see why the river's northern reaches qualify as among America's most scenic and wild rivers. A boat or kayak trip here is like traveling back in time. No houses mar the river's banks. No honking cars or roar of outboard engines. Just the river's symphony – birds, wind, splashing fish.

Travel a few miles south on N.C. 58 to the [CEDAR POINT RECREATION AREA \(MAP #18\)](#) on VFW Road and enter a different world.

From here you can explore the broad, saltwater estuaries of the lower White Oak. The elevated trail offers expansive views of the river's saltwater marshes. Launch your canoe or kayak at the boat ramp for a serene paddle up sheltered Boathouse Creek or head for the river to catch red drum, flounder and speckled trout. You can even pitch your tent or park your RV at the full-service campground.

Hop on the ferry at [HAMMOCKS BEACH STATE PARK \(MAP # 15\)](#) south of Swansboro to visit Bear Island, an uninhabited barrier island that is part of the state park system. The birding here is exceptional and the surf fishing can be magnificent, especially when the big red drum hit the beach in the fall. The park will also be offering marsh cruises this summer. The boat will stop at rugged [HUGGINS ISLAND \(MAP #14\)](#) in the mouth of the White Oak. The federation helped the park buy the island after fending off plans to develop it into an exclusive residential subdivision. Check the federation Web site, www.nccoast.org, for the times and dates of the cruises.

Hammocks Beach is also the embarkation point for trips to [JONES ISLAND \(MAP #17\)](#) in the middle of the lower White Oak. The



Neusiok Trail

federation bought most of the uninhabited island after owners announced plans to develop it. It then donated the land to the park and worked with the park to establish an environmental education and restoration center on the island. Work will be going on all summer to restore the island's marshes and



Painted bunting. Photo by Sam Bland, NCCF

oyster reefs. Volunteers are always needed. You can learn about our coastal estuaries while doing something to improve them. Our Web site has a complete listing of dates.

NEUSIOK TRAIL (MAP #25)

Gene Huntsmen and the other members of the Carteret County Wildlife Club, one of the oldest conservation groups in the state, have worked for more than 30 years to create and maintain this 20-mile trail through the Croatan National Forest. "When the club was smaller just about everyone in it worked on the trail," Huntsmen says. "It's been a real labor of love."

You can hike the entire trail or jump on and off at various places along it. The northern terminus at the Pine Cliff Recreation Area may be the most popular. The 2.5-mile section meanders through the woods and along the sandy beaches of the Neuse River. There are some low hills here but nothing that should prove too taxing.

For complete information on the trail, see www.neusioktrail.org/index.html and www.clis.com/canoe2/neusioktrail.html.

DOWN EAST

Cross the North River bridge into eastern Carteret County. You might see someone working on a wooden boat or stringing their fishing nets beneath the shade of a live oak tree. You might smell the pungent odor of fish and brine and, if you know a native, you actually might eat a breakfast of spot and eggs.

The region known as Down East in these parts consists of marshes and mosquitoes and 13 unincorporated fishing and farming villages facing Core Sound. Targeted by developers because of its vast acreage of waterfront property,

Down East was endangered until the building boom popped a couple of years ago. Fearing the environmental damage of unfettered development and the loss of their heritage and culture, residents had banded together to demand a moratorium on high-density development while better planning and rules were devised. Though hundreds of people attended county commissioners' meetings, the commissioners voted down the moratorium. Residents are using the building respite of the recession to begin planning their future.

Spend a day driving along U.S. 70 and N.C. 12 to find out what all the fuss was about. Visit the [CORE SOUND WATERFOWL MUSEUM AND HERITAGE CENTER \(MAP #7\)](#) and the nearby [CAPE LOOKOUT NATIONAL SEASHORE VISITORS CENTER \(MAP #8\)](#).

From Harkers Island, private ferries will take you out to [CAPE LOOKOUT \(MAP #9\)](#) in the national park. The park offers miles of deserted beaches for walking, swimming, fishing or shelling.

BOGUE BANKS

Though most of this barrier island is developed, there are still places here and there that offer glimpses of how it used to be.

[FORT MACON STATE PARK \(MAP #11\)](#) in Atlantic Beach offers the usual amenities of a state park as well as wonderful views of ships coming through Beaufort Inlet on the way to the state port in Morehead City.

After defeating a proposal to build waterfront condominiums, the federation received a state grant to buy the property that now makes up the 31-acre [HOOP POLE CREEK PRESERVE \(MAP #12\)](#), also in Atlantic Beach. A well-marked trail goes through an evergreen forest

that is one of the few remaining on Bogue Banks and among the most threatened types of natural communities in the state. Rare migratory birds, such as the painted bunting and orange-crowned warbler, take refuge among live oaks, red cedars, loblolly pines, yaupon, wax myrtles and wild olives. You can download a trail brochure at nccoast.org/newsroom/images-pdfs/factsheets/FS_hooppole.pdf.

Emerald Isle received a state grant to buy 43 acres along Bogue Sound to build a public park that could also be used to control stormwater. The result is **EMERALD ISLE WOODS (MAP #13)** off Coast Guard Road. The park has several hiking trails, a bathhouse, picnic shelter, and floating dock on Bogue Sound.



Carrot Island, Beaufort. Photo by Robert Nau

MARSHALLBERG HARBOR

(MAP # 6)

They made Nathan Handwerker of Coney Island rich and famous. They delighted King George VI and his Queen when Eleanor Roosevelt embarrassed a nation and served them at a “state picnic” at Hyde Park. They’ve become a staple at patriotic celebrations and are as much a fixture at sporting events as the goal posts, home plate and the *Star Spangled Banner*. But it is fairly certain that in its long and illustrious history, the hot dog has never saved a harbor.

D.A. Lewis and his neighbors in Marshallberg are betting that it can.

They have cooked up and sold thousands upon thousands of them — no one knows exactly how many — at a buck and a half apiece to pay more than \$200,000 in legal bills in a 13-year fight to preserve their traditional use of the community harbor.

“That’s a lot of red hot dogs,” Lewis said.

Marshallberg is a small place nestled up against Sleepy Creek at the end of a road in eastern Carteret County, an area called Down East. There was a time when most of the people who lived there made their livings from the sea. Harbors are important to fishing communities. That’s where the day’s catch is weighed and converted to dollars to pay the light bill and feed the kids, where neighbors gather to share news and

gossip, where memories are made. “I learned to swim in that harbor,” Lewis said.

New owners bought land around the harbor in the mid-1990s and made certain legal claims. The particulars are complex and convoluted, having to do with easements and riparian rights. What the fight is about really isn’t important anyway. The real story is what the people of Marshallberg did to meet a threat that they perceived would prevent them from using their harbor.

They fought. They banded together to form their own community group. Signs about saving the harbor sprouted up in yards throughout the area. Lawyers were hired, and their bills started mounting. So the community group started cooking. Shrimp plates. Fried fish. Chicken stews. And, of course, hot dogs. First, they sold their plates at the local fire station and later at the small community center that they built. In that way, they raised most of their \$300,000 in legal fees.

All of the other 12 Down East communities have supported the effort by attending the club’s suppers and cookouts.

“It’s just been remarkable,” Lewis said. “It’s been real heart-warming to see this. It kind of renews your faith in people.”

Drop by the community center on a weekend. Lewis will likely sell you a hot dog to save the harbor.

OTHER PLACES WORTH A LOOK

Here are a few other places along the central coast worth visiting.

CEDAR ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE (MAP #2)

If you’ve ever taken the state ferry from Cedar Island at the far end of Carteret County, you’ve gone through the refuge and you probably didn’t know it. U.S. 70 leaves the pinewoods and rises atop a causeway through a vast plain of black needlerush. Almost all of the refuge’s 15,000 acres are salt marsh, making it the largest tract of unaltered, irregularly flooded salt marsh in the state. Launch your shallow-draft boat, canoe or kayak at public boat ramps where N.C. 12 crosses **Thoroughfare Creek (Map #3)** and at the end of Lola Road on **Cedar Island (Map #1)**. Glide along and look for marsh wrens, Virginia rails and other birds. Bring along a light spinning rod because the red drum fishing can be spectacular in the late spring and summer.

For more information: library.fws.gov/Refuges/cedar_island98_lowres.pdf

CROATAN NATIONAL FOREST (MAP #24)

The 160,000-acre forest may not be for everyone. It’s buggy in the summer, and its woods can seem

impenetrable year round, but it’s an island of green in a sea of asphalt and concrete between New Bern and Morehead City. You’ll find miles of hiking and equestrian trails, great stands of mature longleaf pines, acres of wildflowers, endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers and other birds, lakes and rivers for canoeing and kayaking, hunting for deer and wild turkey and places to fish.

The **Patsy Pond Trail (Map #20)** opposite the **N.C. Coastal Federation office (Map #19)** in Ocean in Carteret County courses through a magnificent longleaf pine forest and around natural ponds and sinkholes. You could see the endangered woodpeckers, gray foxes, flying squirrels, ospreys, wild turkeys and white-tailed deer. The federation maintains the trail and you can download a trail guide from our Web site, www.nccoast.org.

A number of freshwater lakes dot the interior of the forest. The best known are **Catfish (Map #22)** and **Great (Map #23)** lakes. Canoes or kayaks are the best for these shallow lakes, which support a decent population of alligators. In fact, the Croatan is the northernmost place where these reptiles can be reliably seen.

Brice Creek (Map #26) in the northeastern tip of the forest is another good paddling destination. The blackwater creek winds through a freshwater swamp on its way to the Trent River. The Craven County Recreation and Parks Department has a good map on its Web site, www.cravencounty.com/parks/paddle/trip13.cfm.

For more information: Call forest headquarters, 252-638-5628; www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc.

RACHEL CARSON RESERVE (MAP #10)

It takes a little bit of effort to get to this string of small islands and marshes that parallel the Beaufort waterfront in Carteret County, but you’ll be rewarded for the effort by experiencing an undisturbed estuarine habitat that is a center of marine research and education. Accessible only by boat, the reserve is a great place to hike, kayak and look for birds. A half-mile interpretive trail on the west side of the reserve meanders through mudflats, uplands and salt marshes, illustrating the various unique environments found in estuarine systems. A small herd of wild horses roams the islands and over 200 bird species have been recorded here.

For more information: Call the reserve office at 252-838-0886. www.nccoastalreserve.net/About-The-Reserve/Reserve-Sites/Rachel-Carson/58.aspx



CATFISH LAKE: GIANT BEAVERS OR CELESTIAL ENCOUNTERS?

BY SAM BLAND

The sun is low, creating long shadows of the tall mature pine trees as I drive along a wide, dusty, gravel road known simply as FS 1105. The road started out paved off N.C. 58 in Jones County and was announced only by a small green street sign that read “Catfish Lake Road.”

A kettle of turkey vultures swirled high in the sky, gliding in lazy circles over my destination, Catfish Lake.

This 962-acre lake is a small part of the 16,000-acre [CROATAN NATIONAL FOREST \(MAP #24\)](#) that stretches into parts of Craven, Jones and Carteret counties.

As I make my way down the road, I meet

several vehicles that are traveling much too fast on the loose gravel road bed. As they passed, a thick rooster tail plume of white dust creates an artificial fog that obstructs my visibility for a few seconds. The first section of gravel road is bordered by stands of fire-resistant longleaf pine trees. The trees were once an important source of turpentine, tar, rosin and pitch and

heartwood lumber for building boats and houses.

The ground underneath these trees is scorched black from a recent “controlled burn” of the brushy undergrowth and leaves, pines needles and branches on the ground. The U.S. Forest Service, which manages the Croatan, uses these burns as part of its efforts to restore the longleaf ecosystem. The fires mimic the natural forest fires that lightning ignited for centuries. They prevent the accumulation of thick layers of leaves and branches on the ground that could lead to devastating forest fires.

A low-intensity “controlled” fire is also so vital to the survival of the longleaf pine ecosystem that forest rangers set them about every three years. Burning off the ground cover allows the pine seeds to reach the sandy soil, absorb nutrients and establish a tap root. The fires also open up the forest floor and eliminate competing vegetation that would otherwise shade out the young pine trees.

This is perfect habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker that has taken up residence in the forest. This is the only woodpecker that chisels out a nesting cavity in a live tree, patiently drilling away for up to two years to complete the cavity. Since the tree is still alive, sticky sap oozes from the wounded tree creating a protective barrier that discourages predators such as black snakes from entering the nest. In 2011, forest rangers catalogued 68 nesting pairs of these rare birds. They also discovered that the woodpeckers have their work cut out for them to establish new nesting cavities, since 38 cavity trees were brought down last year during Hurricane Irene.

From the road there is no indication that a fairly large lake lies just a few hundred yards to the north. The tall pines no longer dominate, but the pocosin shrubs are so dense that they obscure any glimpse of the water. To actually find the lake, I turn onto a dirt road identified only with a thin fiberglass post marked “NC4.” Thin chocolate dust clouds billow up behind my truck as I slowly bump along wondering if this is the road to the lake. A parade of butterflies escorts me along the open road corridor; cloudless sulfurs, palamedes swallowtails and eastern tiger swallowtail butterflies are busy looking for nectar-producing flowers or scouting out a safe place to hunker down for the night.

I finally come across a small opening in the vegetation and see the lake. It’s much bigger than expected. This access spot is already occupied by a vehicle and a family tending to

their fishing poles. As I continue down the road I notice a short path that opens up with a larger view of the lake and room for more than a few vehicles to park. A group of young men are tentatively minding their fishing poles and seem more interested in why I am intruding on their hangout. I get out of my truck and put them at ease with small talk about the beautiful evening and the obligatory “catching anything” question. They quickly ignore me as I gaze out upon the calm smooth surface of the lake.

Tiny ripples well up on the shore and reveal water that is the color of strong tea. The water has been darkened with suspended decaying peat particles, called tannins, stirred up from the organic bottom of the lake. Very little aquatic vegetation and plankton can survive in this lake since sunlight can't penetrate the brown water. However, some plankton does exist; two new species of single-celled plankton from Catfish Lake were recently described by researchers. It is thought that these two new species may have adapted to the dark acidic water that prevents other algae from growing.

Catfish Lake is one of over 500,000 elliptical-shaped lakes that pepper the East Coast from Florida to New Jersey and possess unique characteristics to be classified as Carolina bay lakes. The formation of these lakes has ignited passionate debate among geologists,



biologists and other scientists. Theories range from upwelling of artesian springs, peat burning by Native Americans, dams created by giant beavers and dust devils. Some contend that when the coastal plain was once covered by the ocean, these depressions were scoured out by submarine currents or thousands of spawning fish. Spurred by an aerial photo in 1933, one popular theory was that the lakes were created by comet fragments that slammed into the Earth. Here's the fanciful account of this cosmic event that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* that year:

The comet plunged down with a hiss that shook the mountains, with a crackle that opened the sky. Beneath the down plunging piston of star, compressed air gathered. Its might equaled and then exceeded that of the great star itself. It burst the comet nucleus. It pushed outward a scorching wind that must have shoved the waters upon the European shores, and on land leveled three hundred foot pines, spreading them radially outward like matches in a box. The comet struck, sending debris skyward, curtaining the east, darkening the west. Writhing clouds of steam swirled with writhing clouds of earth. For ten minutes there was a continuous bombardment, and the earth heaved and shook. For 500 miles around the focal spot of 190,000 square miles, the furnace snuffed out every form of life.

It is not really known how these lakes formed, but out of the 19 theories, I like the one involving giant beavers the best.

Further down the dirt road I find a third access spot; it too already has occupants. Three friendly young Marines are earnestly trying to catch fish and report that they have indeed pulled in some very small catfish and bullheads that they released. The chemistry of this lake does not allow for a diversity of fish, other than catfish, a few yellow perch and bluegill. This is not a fisherman's paradise, thus, Catfish Lake does not attract a crowd. People may also avoid the lake because it is reported to be a relocation site for delinquent alligators.

The entire area around Catfish is a natural delight, and the longleaf pines and woodpeckers are just a start. Insectivorous plants such as Venus fly traps, sundews and pitcher plants share the ground with three different species of rattlesnakes. Black bear, mink and raccoons roam about while prothonotary warblers, wild turkey, indigo buntings and Swainson's warblers are sought after by avid bird watchers.

This remote, isolated, boggy wilderness may seem devoid of life at first, but spend a little time here and you'll find yourself wanting to go back.



Look closely at the marsh grass. Periwinkles abound. Photo by Sam Bland

TAKE A BEAR ISLAND CAMPING TRIP

BY CHRISTINE MILLER

Almost any time of year, one of my favorite places to be is on [BEAR ISLAND \(MAP # 27\)](#). But my dedication to the place pales in comparison to that of Sam Bland, my coworker here at the federation. I haven't been able to get out there yet this year, so I decided to pick his brain (and swipe some of his fantastic photos).

Sam is built for speed; there's not an extra ounce on his spare frame. He sits in the lumpy chair across from me, speaking in quiet tones about the place he spent more than 20 years protecting in his prior career as the superintendent and ranger at Hammocks Beach State Park and still spends as much time as possible, just visiting. His face lights up as he talks; it's a pleasure to listen.

Between us, we've been to Bear Island thousands of times. By that, I mean I've been there maybe a dozen and he accounts for the rest, but who's counting?

First, the basics: Bear Island is part of [HAMMOCKS BEACH \(MAP # 15\)](#), which is off N.C. 24 in Swansboro, on the central part of the coast. The 892-acre, undeveloped barrier island has more than three miles of oceanfront, and backs up to a wonderland of marsh and tidal creeks. It's a prime example of what a barrier island should be.

The island played starring roles in Indian culture, pirate lore and the Civil War, before becoming a beach for African Americans during segregation. The park has a good accounting of the rich history of the island here.

The island has primitive camping all year and water and restrooms open March through October. You reserve and pay for your campsite

online—the website was down for a while this winter, but it's active again now. If you don't book online, you will likely be out of luck. There are 14 camping sites that will hold up to six people each. Three are on the marsh side, the rest on the ocean, tucked in the first line of dunes and they're all \$13 a night. There are no roads to the island, so you have to get there by water, either on the park ferry or your own personal water craft. This limits the number of people out there—a huge bonus in my book.

The ferry begins to run again Friday. It's first-come, first-served, so even though you reserve your campsite online, you still need to go into the visitor center, register and buy a ferry ticket (\$5 for adults, \$3 for children and

people over 62). Come early, or you may be waiting around.

Pack lightly if going by ferry—you will need to schlep your belongings anywhere from a half to a little over a mile along the trail to your campsite.

When I go, we paddle, and most of the time when Sam goes now, he paddles, so I'll focus on that.

If you're kayaking, you still need to park and register, show them ID and your reservation and give them your car tag number. They have a cart, if you need help hauling your boat down to the dock. They also have a nifty launching tube on the dock. Once you're in it, you can slide yourself right on into the water, very smoothly.

Check the tides before you go. Low tide is very low, and when it's down you will not make it

Bottlenose dolphins are always good for a show. Photo by Sam Bland



loggerhead hatchlings make their way to the sea. Photo by Sam Bland



The tracks of baby turtles in the sand on Bear Island. Photo by Sam Bland

to the lagoon at the end of the trail; you will find yourself stuck until the water comes back in.

Once you cut across the Intracoastal Waterway, the Bear Island paddle trail is clearly defined with orange markers. Don't follow the yellow ones unless you want to circle nearby Huggins Island. It's gorgeous, but takes you through six miles of meandering marsh. Very impressive, granted, but if you're headed for the campsite, you're better off meandering on the orange path.

The trail takes you along tidal creeks through the marsh, with crabs skittering and birds calling throughout the trip. The trail ends at a lagoon. Pull out by the park sign. Campsites 7, 8 and 9 are just a short haul through a cut in the dune after you land. For this reason, they're also the first to be reserved.

The inland landscape contains both maritime forest and sand dunes. While the shore is the right place for sunset and moon rise, the high (well, high for the coast) inland dunes are the place to take a blanket and sky watch. While full moon nights are popular, Sam prefers the new moon; the lack of light pollution almost guarantees that you'll see shooting stars, even if you're not there for the Perseids, an annual August meteor shower.

Sam has a warning, though—two, actually. First, there are cacti on the island that will laugh at your flip flops as they stab their way to your feet. Bring sturdy shoes or you'll sport puncture holes on the way home.

Also, there is almost always a breeze on

the island, which feels great. Occasionally, however, there is not. If you're stretched out stargazing when the wind dies down, blood-thirsty bugs of all descriptions will descend upon you, so bring bug spray, the tough stuff. Sam tells a fine tale of being driven so crazy by mosquitoes and no see 'ems that he had to jump up and run into the ocean at 3 a.m. one night in his PJs.

Of course, Sam being Sam, this led to him discovering the joys of bioluminescence, which peaks in the shallow waters off Bear Island in late spring and early summer. The small sea creatures light up when they brush by. I've seen it, and it's magical. The bioluminescence, I mean, not Sam in PJs.

Through the marshes, birds abound. Egrets stalk elegantly, poised to strike their prey if only we would paddle on by. An osprey takes a dive into the water and emerges with half a fish sticking out of its beak. Terns do the same, though with more frequency and less success. Also smaller splashes. In the spring, migratory colonial shore birds will show up to nest on the exposed beaches at the point, including hundreds of least terns, Wilson's plovers and others. Sam says the flocks, which nest together on the flat sand at the point of the island, make great photo subjects.

If you watch the water as you paddle the marshes, you may see a cow-nosed ray—they hide in the creek bottoms, coming in on the tides. Shrimp and various fish are also plentiful.

And charismatic mega-fauna—Bear Island's

got 'em. I've seen bottlenose dolphins most of the times I've visited, and Sam has not only seen them, but taken some striking pictures. The dolphins cruise the ocean shoreline, and there are few beach sites that generate such excitement for visitors.

And turtles. Bear Island hosts between 20 and 30 loggerhead sea turtle nests each year. The mama turtles lay their eggs in mid-to late-May, and the hatchlings emerge and make a run for the sea August to October. Rangers mark and watch the sites, and volunteers come to watch over the nests and to try to protect the tiny turtles from those that want to snack upon them, such as ghost crabs, raccoons and foxes.

No fires are allowed on the island. I like a good campfire as much as most, but in this case, it makes good sense. If a fire starts, there is no way to put it out, so, in Sam's words, "the whole thing would go up." That's what happened in 1945, when the maritime forest was destroyed. The park learned the lesson.

While I'm at it, there is also no alcohol allowed in the park, and Sam says to tell you that big scary rangers will find you and take it away if you bring it.

By the time we're done talking, I'm itching to look at the weather and the site reservations to see if I can get myself out there this weekend. I think he is, too. He looks off into the middle distance. "When I'm there, I'm home," he says. "It brings me joy."

The joy part: Me, too, Sam—me, too.



Photo by Robin Lucarelli

SOUTHEAST COAST:

Be a 'Kindred Spirit' on Bird Island

A lady from Connecticut walked the mile to the mailbox in the dunes at the end of Bird Island on an April day in 1993. She found the dog-eared notebook inside. She wrote the following:

"I am making this pilgrimage for my husband, Martin, who died 8-23-92 from leukemia. He loved Bird Island and all the surrounding area. I know he is with me here today."

A woman from Charlotte left a more joyous note on a page next to a lipstick-lips kiss: "Thanks for a beautiful day!"

Bird Island (Map #1) has that kind of effect on people. Once separated from Sunset Beach in Brunswick County by a narrow, meandering inlet that dried up with every low tide, the island affixed itself permanently to the southern end of Sunset when the inlet closed for good in 1997.

No longer deterred by the tide, thousands of people have walked this wide, deserted beach – the last bit of sand in North Carolina – and have found the mailbox, sitting crookedly on a wooden post in the dunes. It's one of those standard-issue, half-dome affairs that adorn rural roads across the state. There is one difference. Painted in block letters on its side are the words "Kindred Spirit." Inside is a notebook. People fill it with their reminiscences, their most personal feelings, their prayers. They have been doing it for almost 25 years, filling five or six notebooks each summer.

Frank Nesmith thinks he knows why. A native of these parts, Nesmith put the mailbox in the dunes in the mid-1980s as a way for

people to correspond with other kindred spirits who love the beauty and solitude of the place. Instead, they come to commune with the spirits. "Something happens to a person when they walk that mile or two miles down to the mailbox," he says. "It invites them. They sit down and are moved to write their cherished thoughts. It's a special place. People seldom forget it."

Bird Island, though, was in danger of being a rather forgettable place or, to put it more kindly, of being like any other developed place along the coast. For most of the time that the Kindred Spirit has been beckoning visitors, Bird Island was under the gun. The owners of the uninhabited island wanted to build a mile-long bridge across the marsh to connect the island to Sunset Beach. A subdivision and pier were also part of the plan for this island.

Guided by the N.C. Coastal Federation, people put up a ten-year fight to save it. They banded together to write letters, raise money, pack public meetings and lobby legislators. What started as a local effort, soon spread throughout the state. Tourists from towns across America joined the cause. It ended with one of the great conservation victories in North Carolina.

"We won eventually because of the dedication and hard work of a lot of people, but the outcome was never certain," said Bill Ducker, the acknowledged leader of fight to save the island.

His house in Sunset Beach sits across a sea of waving cordgrass and black needlerush that now separates Bird Island from Sunset. The marsh attracts a variety of the avian creatures that give the island its name. Herons and egrets nest in the high ground above it, as do least

terns and skimmers. Painted buntings, a rarity along our coast, flit through the high grass.

Aside from offering a good vantage point for bird watching, Ducker's house occupies a special place in the history of the island. It was here that the activists came to plan and plot. A wall in the house is covered in hand-written messages of encouragement from those who took part in the fight or in heartfelt notes of thanks from those who visited later.

Ten local people gathered in the house in March 1992 for the first meeting. Among them were Minnie Hunt and Sue Weddle. Like the others they were alarmed when the island's owners asked the state for permit to build a bridge to connect Sunset to Bird Island. They wanted to subdivide the island into 15 lots and build a pier. The people in the house that day sat down to write letters to state and federal officials expressing their opposition to the permits.

Six months later, with the help of the federation, the N.C. Coastal Land Trust and N.C. Audubon, they formed the Bird Island Preservation Society and began raising money for the long fight ahead. Within a year, it would raise more than \$25,000 and could count more than 1,400 members.

Many joined after walking the beach with Nesmith. Amid the growing controversy, Nesmith invited people to walk with him along the beach he so loved. On some days, a hundred or more took him up on the invitation. Nesmith would talk about the island's history, point out its creatures and decry a future of subdivisions and bridges. The beach walks received nationwide publicity, and Nesmith was soon dubbed "the mayor of Bird Island."

"Frank was our inspiration," Hunt says, "and those beach walks were a stroke of genius."



Hundreds of people attended public meetings of the N.C. Coastal Resources Commission, the state panel that would decide whether to allow the bridge. More than 800 wrote letters to the commission opposing the development of the island. Finally, in January 1996, the commission voted unanimously to forbid a bridge to Bird Island and passed a resolution recommending that the state buy the island.

Haggling then ensued over the price. After settling on \$4.2 million, the state tried for several years to raise the money. Using a combination of state and federal grants and \$700,000 from the N.C. Department of Transportation, the state finally acquired all of the island in April 2002. It is now protected as part of the N.C. Coastal Reserve.

An anonymous writer went by the mailbox in the dunes soon after the deal was done and succinctly expressed the feelings of many: "Hallelujah!!"

LOCKWOOD FOLLY RIVER (MAP #2)

Before the recession, Brunswick County was among the fastest-growing counties in the country. Since 1980 the county's population has tripled to more than 93,000, and another 35,000 residents are expected to arrive by 2020. Residents worried that widespread growth could harm the Lockwood Folly River. Shellfish closures in the river's 150-square-mile watershed had already tripled to 55 percent since 1980 because of bacteria from stormwater runoff.

Worried that continued development would further threaten the river's health and the

continued viability of the local fishing industry, the Brunswick County Board of Commissioners three years ago teamed up with the N.C. Coastal Federation and federal and state agencies to establish the Lockwood Folly Watershed Roundtable. The eight-member group, which included participants from a range of backgrounds, was tasked with developing strategies that would balance development with the needs of the environment. The final strategies include recommendations such as using alternate techniques to control runoff from new development, retrofitting existing stormwater problems and acquiring strategic properties from willing sellers.

Since 2007, the federation, using a federal grant, has been sampling the river's water to determine the sources of the bacteria polluting its oyster and clam beds and working on a plan to help restore those waters.

Development hasn't yet overrun the river. It is still a fetching place where you can get a glimpse of the N.C. coast that is fast disappearing. Travel to Varnamtown at the river's mouth. It is still a traditional fishing village that is home to the largest remaining shrimp-trawling fleet in the county. Everybody in town knows each other, and they're likely to serve visitors collards with their shrimp.

NORTHEAST CAPE FEAR RIVER (MAP #4)

Palmetto and cypress grow along its banks. Alligators swim in its waters. Pileated woodpeckers nest in the forests that line its shores. The Northeast Cape Fear River is a

beautiful river that has been sadly abused.

Coursing lazily some 130 miles through the state's southeast coastal plain, the Northeast Cape Fear suffered a number of major spills from hog lagoons and an oil spill from a now-defunct metal recycling plant in the 1990s. It recovered from all that only to have industrial developers eye it for a cement plant that will rip up its life-sustaining wetlands and



poison its water with mercury.

Titan America wants to build the fourth-largest cement kiln in the country along the banks of the Northeast Cape Fear in Castle Hayne near Wilmington. The company also proposes digging a strip mine near the plant for the limestone to make its cement. The mine would destroy more than 1,000 acres of wetlands.

Thousands of people have risen up against the proposals. They worry about what will happen to the river and to the people who live along it. They've signed petitions, jammed public hearings and traveled to Raleigh to lobby their legislators. The federation was among the Titan opponents who successfully sued the state to force the company to do a thorough review of the plant's environmental effects.

It's worth seeing what all the fuss is about.

A boat, canoe or kayak is obviously the best way to see the river. The state maintains a boat ramp off U.S. 117 near the Northeast Cape Fear River bridge. It provides the quickest access



to the river near the proposed plant site at Island Creek. The river floodplain in this area supports one of the highest quality and most scenic examples of freshwater tidal cypress-gum swamp anywhere, especially along the lower reaches of the tributary creeks.

PERMUDA ISLAND (MAP #7)

Sandwiched between the two bridges to Topsail Island, Stump Sound often is overlooked by visitors in their rush to the beach. It is an inviting place. Waters here are protected enough that waves rarely get dangerous. Boat access is easy and safe, and many of the forested islands that dot the sound have sandy beaches that are perfect for picnicking and sun bathing.

The dense salt marshes that fringe the sound provide shelter and food for many marine creatures, and the sound has a long history of supporting productive commercial fishing. If you haven't tried a Stump Sound oyster, you're in for treat.

It was the oysters that led to a historic fight to save an island in the sound from development. Permuda Island is small and narrow. It's about 1.5 miles long and has only 50 acres or so of high ground, but it's close enough to Topsail Island that developers in 1983 wanted to build a bridge and erect condominiums.

Lena Ritter knew what that would mean

for the waters that she depended on for her livelihood. Such intense development on such a small patch of land would lead to polluted runoff that would close the sound's productive oyster and clam beds. A native of nearby Holly Springs in Onslow County, Ritter had fished these waters all her life, as her father and grandfather did before her. Feisty and combative, she organized other fishermen and enlisted the aid of the federation, then only about a year old.

Ritter spent most of the next three years attending meetings, writing letters and haranguing state and local officials. She even got Walter Cronkite to visit the sound.

The work paid off. The state finally denied the permits in 1986, and the island is now publicly owned as a natural and historic estuary preserve.

Accessible only by water, the island is worth a visit in the fall. Shorebirds feed in the marshes and mudflats. Willets, American oystercatchers, egrets, herons, black skimmers and sandpipers are common. You may even see river otters playing in the marsh.

MORRIS LANDING (MAP #8)

At Morris Landing, you can experience the beauty of Stump Sound without getting in a boat. Here, you can fish, go crabbing or clamming, look for birds, launch a kayak and

even roll up your sleeves to help restore the island's marshes.

The landing has long been a place where locals went to do all those things. But heavy



Black Crown Night Heron. Photo by Sam Bland

unrestricted use had degraded the marshes along the shoreline, leading to erosion and loss of habitat.

The federation in 2004 bought 52 acres at Morris Landing through a grant from the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund and now works with local people to restore the shoreline. Our volunteers plant marsh grass and build oyster reefs, and we have planned activities throughout the year. Check our Web site, www.nccoast.org, or email Ted Wilgis on our staff at tedw@nccoast.org.

OTHER PLACES WORTH A LOOK

Here are a few other places along the southeast coast worth visiting.

AIRLIE GARDENS (MAP #5)

Unlike most of the other places on this list, Airlie Gardens is no secret. You'll find it listed in all the standard-issue tourist publications. We decided to include it anyway because it is a local treasure and the last undeveloped tract along Bradley Creek. Aside from impressing visitors with the drop-dead gorgeous display of azaleas and camellias, Airlie also is committed to educating them about our coastal environment. Thousands of students and adults have learned about the value of our marshes and oyster reefs through programs offered at Airlie, which has partnered with the N.C. Coastal Federation on numerous restoration projects.

Birding hikes and eco-tours of Bradley Creek are offered regularly in the summer.

For more information: www.airliedgardens.org

BRUNSWICK NATURE PARK (MAP #3)

Opened in late 2009, the park is the newest in Brunswick

County. Unlike most other parks in the county, which include ball fields, playgrounds and other "active" amenities, the 911-acre nature park is a passive place — a place for leisurely walks in the woods or serene paddles down Town Creek. The N.C. Coastal Land Trust bought the land from a paper company with a grant from the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund and donated it to the county.

The park is still a work in progress. Though there are no formal trails, you can explore the quiet woods to look for birds or for Venus flytraps that grow in remote edges of the park. Kayakers and canoeists can use the launch to glide up Town Creek toward U.S. 17 or downstream through an old rice plantation to the Cape Fear River. You may see an alligator, if you're lucky.

For more information: www.brunswickcountync.gov/Departments/ParksandRecreation/tabid/64/Default.aspx

LEA-HUTAFF ISLAND (MAP #6)

Lea-Hutaff Island stretches between Topsail and Figure

Eight islands from New Topsail to Rich inlets. It's 5,641 acres of barrier island and marsh that joined into one island in 1998 with the closure of Old Topsail Inlet. Acquisition of the remaining private lots for conservation is a priority for numerous government agencies and conservation organizations since this is the only remaining undeveloped island in the southeast which is not in public ownership. If you'd like to visit, google Lea-Hutaff Island — many local guides can take you out. Remember to respect the private land on the island by sticking to the public trust beaches and abiding by all signs to avoid bird nesting areas.

RIVERWORKS AT STURGEON CITY (MAP #9)

This city park in Jacksonville is on the site of an old sewer plant that was responsible for polluting adjacent Wilson Bay. City leaders closed down the old plant and began restoring the bay. They made the plant into an environmental education center where over 5,000 students and citizens learn annually. They have also created a big public park with boardwalks along the river.

For more information: www.sturgeoncity.org

TAKE A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE: HOLLY SHELTER GAME LAND

BY PAM SMITH

Vic French knows [HOLLY SHELTER GAME LAND PRESERVE \(MAP # 10\)](#) like the back of his hand.



Yellow-rumped Warbler. Photo by Sam Bland

The rest of us better have a detailed map, a GPS device and a good compass to take a walk on the wild side in this 65,000-acre biological cornucopia in Pender County.

French, a biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, has been associated with the preserve in various capacities for most of his 30-plus years with the commission.

He'll tell you upfront that while the commission, governmental agencies and environmental groups play a role in protecting its natural wildness, Mother Nature is very much in charge of its distinct design.

Holly Shelter encompasses an expanse of longleaf pine woodlands, savannas, Carolina bays, pocosins and black water streams. Each unique habitat hosts equally unique plant and wildlife, including several threatened or endangered species found exclusively in the state's southeastern coastal plain.

Much of the site is remote and inaccessible, but a series of roads are open to the public for hiking, birding, biking and seasonal hunting in designated areas.

The main road into Holly Shelter Game Land, off U.S. 17 just north of Hampstead, serves as an introduction to the preserve's varied ecosystem scenarios. An initial tangle of vegetation atop a sandy ridge gives way to a flat, open stretch of golden wire grass dancing in the wind beneath a stand of longleaf pine trees.

Many of the stately longleaf are marked with a pair of painted stripes, indicating active red-cockaded woodpecker cavities – “government housing,” as French jokingly calls them.

About 10 percent of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker population in southeastern North Carolina nest among the

site's longleaf pines. That's no accident, French explains. Wildlife biologists follow a prescribed protocol to protect the iconic endangered species that relies on open stands of mature longleaf pines for nesting. At Holly Shelter, specialists conduct periodic controlled burns to maintain suitable habitat.

The controlled burns also promote the regeneration of beneficial plant species that attract other wildlife, including squirrels, quail, snakes and myriad reptiles. Along with native wiregrass, the longleaf pine understory may feature spikes of yucca, bluestem sedge, reed grass, Joe-pye weed and toothache grass. Confederate jasmine, roughleaf loosestrife, goldeneaster or roundheaded lespedeza may add dots and dashes of color.

Gall berry, an evergreen shrub, seems to thrive in a range of Holly Shelter ecosystems. Its tiny sweet-smelling flowers attract honey bees galore. Gall berry honey, French attests, is prized nectar.

Vic French steps across a meadow of wire grass and gall berry to draw a distinction between the tidy, longleaf woodland and the adjacent jumble of a Carolina bay community.

Pond pines and loblolly bays jut above the dense, impenetrable understory of red and sweet bay, wax myrtle and unending twists of greenbrier.

Unlike the sandy longleaf pine woodland floor, soils here are deep and rich in organic matter – the by-product of undisturbed cycles of decomposing plant material – as much as six feet deep. The densely intertwined vegetation provides perfect cover for all manner of wildlife, including black bears, wild turkeys, nesting birds and reptiles, such as frogs and turtles.

Unfortunately, this preferred habitat proved fatal for wildlife caught in the lightning-sparked wildfire during the summer of 2011. The fire, which began in June, smoldered relentlessly in mostly inaccessible areas where drought had turned deep organic soils to tinder. By the time Hurricane Irene extinguished the embers in August, more than 30,000 acres were reduced to ash.

“Pond pines are not fire resistant. They fell over and burned, along with the dry understory.

The fire was so intense, the soils burned away. The ground level dropped significantly and the seed banks and roots were destroyed,” says French. “It all will be under water when the heavy rains come.”

RECOVERY FROM FIRE

Recovery in the vast devastated area seems doubtful any time soon.

The drought that caused a drop in the water table also dried up creeks and streams that might have helped lessen the path of destruction. Fire-fighting became a matter of containment efforts, French explains. To box the fire in, wide corridors were cleared of vegetation along existing roads and power grids, exposing bare soil and removing burnable material, in order to break the fire's spread.

Another fire that started last weekend outside the preserve threatened to cross over into the game lands.

Oddly, protected plants such as the Venus fly trap and sun dew are showing up in random spots and pitcher plants are making a comeback along disturbed areas at the fringes of the fire zone.

The rare carnivorous plants commonly grow in Holly Shelter savannas – the transition

Fox Squirrel. Photo by Sam Bland



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Providing public hunting opportunities has been a major focus of the N.C. Wildlife Commission for decades.

Holly Shelter Game Land origins can be traced to 1939 with the reallocation of 38,000 acres of untamed land from the N.C. Board of Education to the N.C. Conservation and Development Division — the forerunner of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

Since its creation as the Holly Shelter Wildlife Refuge, as it was known, the site has been expanded as a result of continued acquisitions and cooperative agreements with other state, federal, corporate and private landowners. The Federal Pittman-Roberson Act of 1937 enables ten percent tax on ammunition and firearms sales to go toward acquisition and preservation of wildlife restoration sites for hunting and fishing.

Much of the site is remote and inaccessible. A series of roads are open to the public for seasonal hunting in designated areas. Licensed hunters may arrange to stay at a primitive campsite for their quest of deer, squirrels, quail, wild turkeys and black bears. And, handicapped sportsmen may use four-wheel recreational vehicles at two accessible game land sites.

Two access points into Holly Shelter offer hikers and birders a chance to enjoy some of the game land's diverse habitats:

1. Take N.C. 210 east from I-40 and cross the Northeast Cape Fear River. Drive less than a mile past the river and turn left on Shaw Highway (SR 1520). Go 7.3 miles to the Wildlife Commission boat access area by the river. Follow the trail along the dike between the river and the swamp forest.
2. From the intersection on N.C. 210 and U.S. 17 in Hampstead, drive north on U.S. 17 4.4 miles. Look for a N.C. Wildlife Commission sign on the left at the entrance to Lodge Road. The road is gated and closed from March 1 through Aug. 31, but you can walk into the game land here and walk through the flatwoods.



Venus Flytraps. Photo by Sam Bland

zones between dry longleaf woodlands and wet pocosin habitat.

Don't ask French to name his favorite part of Holly Shelter. It's a bit like asking a father to choose his favorite child. "It changes with every season," he says.

Case in point: As French pulls his pick-up truck alongside the Ashes Creek impoundment, the crunch of tires on the gravel road results in a flurry of activity nearby. Nearly 500 green-winged teal ducks frantically rise from the water, circle the marsh, and settle onto a more secluded spot to renew grazing the smorgasbord of grasses and insects in the shallow fresh water.

"They showed up a couple of weeks ago," French notes with an edge of excitement in his voice. "I'll show you another recent arrival."

He drives a couple hundred yards and points across an open field to the edge of a burned out Carolina bay community. A newly built eagle's nest sits at the top of a singed, skeleton of a tree.

"It's a mystery why the eagle chose that nearly dead tree," French muses.

Nor can he account for the pair of wild turkeys that scurry along one of the plowed over fire break lines — not their usual preferred habitat.

A GOOD PLACE FOR FROGS

Still, he knows for certain why rare Carolina gopher frogs choose to do their spring courting in bog ponds — some natural and some provided

by wildlife personnel.

"We help Mother Nature out a bit by providing a clear pond with no fish to eat eggs or tadpoles during breeding season," French says.

The good news is that most of the Holly Shelter Game Land was unscathed by last year's fire. It continues to be a popular destination to observe the array of native plants, butterflies and beneficial insects that inhabit its diverse ecosystems.

Holly Shelter also is a birder's delight: Along with the celebrated red-cockaded woodpecker, it is the year-round home to the Bachman's sparrow, and the preferred breeding habitat for the Acadian flycatcher, as well as Prothonotary, Swainson's, hooded and yellow-throated warblers.

Typical native plants that thrive in coastal counties include sweet bay magnolia, loblolly bay, bay laurel, sweet bay, gall berry, titi, fetterbush, zenobia and a variety of ornamental grasses.

Pam Smith cut her journalism teeth 30 years ago working for community newspapers in North Carolina. She honed her science-writing skills at N.C. State University's News Services before joining the communications team at North Carolina Sea Grant. There, she wrote about a full range of coastal topics for "Coastwatch" magazine. Since retiring to Brunswick County in 2005, she continues to contribute articles to the magazine about the Southeast coastal region.



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