

NORTH CAROLINA COASTAL FEDERATION

2010

STATE OF THE COAST

REPORT

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

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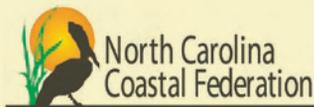
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The North Carolina Coastal Federation is located on Highway 24 in Ocean, N.C., between Swansboro and Morehead City. Our offices, nature library and shop are open Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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www.ncdot.org/dmv



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Bogue Sound. Cheryl Burke

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 this *State of the Coast Report* was hatched. What we needed, I concluded, was a report that would help visitors and residents learn how to celebrate the rich natural and cultural heritage of the NC coast.

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, this *State of the Coast Report* 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 report 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

Long-time readers of this publication know that our annual *State of the Coast Reports* tackle weighty topics. In just the last few years, we've explored such grave issues as stormwater pollution, beach development, global warming and oyster restoration. We're immensely proud that some of our reports have led to changes to rules or to new laws.

Those faithful readers, then, should be forgiven for scratching their heads at this one. A travel guide? Have you people gone soft?

Let us explain.

We here at the 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 *State of the Coast Report* offers a few possibilities. Yes, 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. Most 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



Southport. Glen Matthews

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.

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.

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 this *State of the Coast Report* 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 recent 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 *State of the Coast Report* shows, it often takes the determined efforts of thousands of people.

Maybe this message isn't as weighty as stormwater pollution or the threat of rising seas. But it may be more important.

HOW TO TREASURE THE COAST

In this *State of the Coast Report*, we describe three basic habitats — the remaining natural barrier islands, our sounds and tidal creeks, and the rivers and vast wetlands inland of our salty waters. Here are some tips on how and when to visit each:

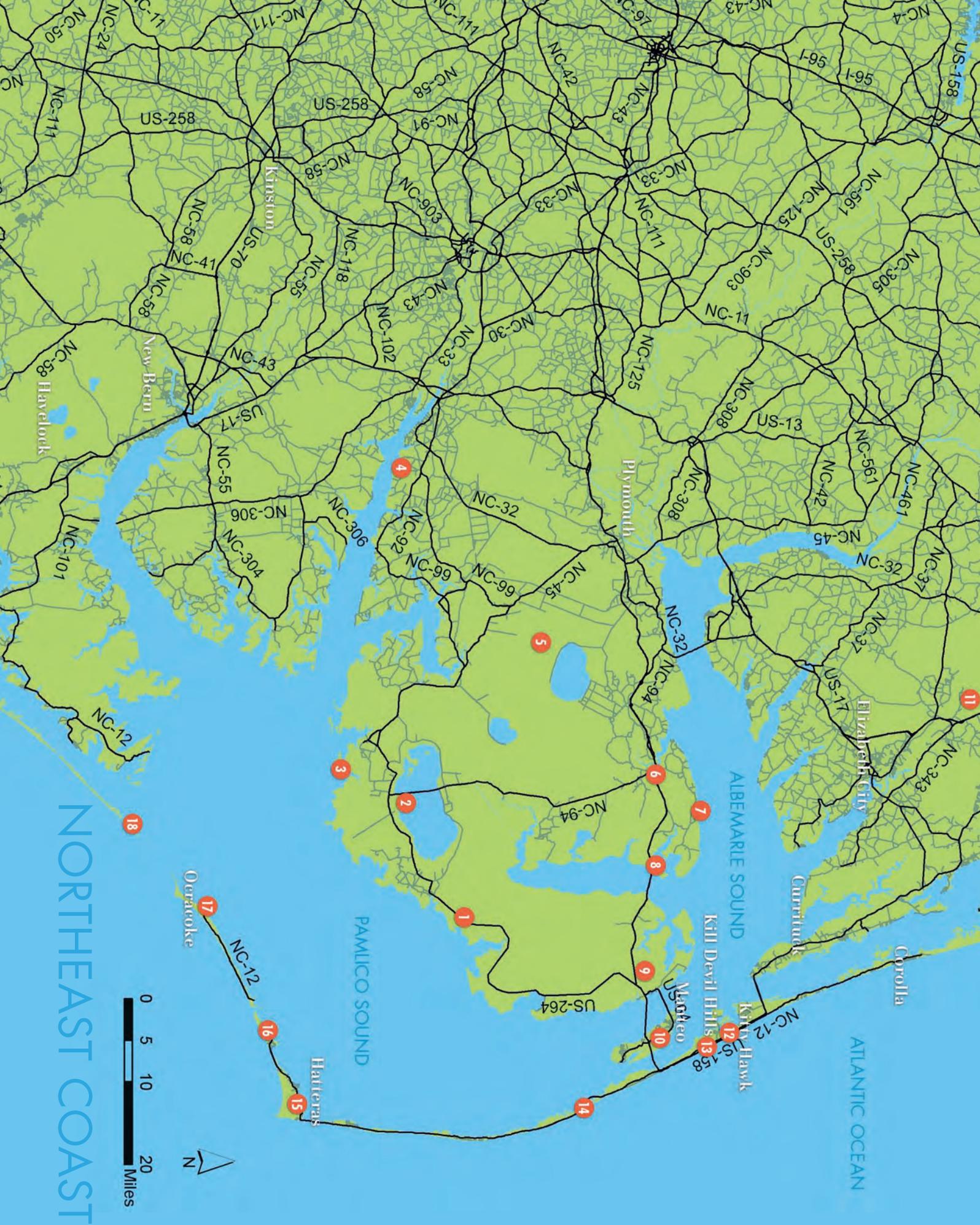
BARRIER ISLANDS: We typically go to the beach year-round. Inlets are very special places for all beach activities—walking, swimming (away from strong currents), shelling, fishing, bird watching. When the weather cools, exploring the interior of our undeveloped barrier islands is a special treat. On Bear Island, for example, the dunes move like glaciers, advancing over woods and shrubs. These islands have something to do all four seasons of the year.

SOUNDS AND CREEKS: These can keep us busy and fed. It helps to have a boat of some sort to see these areas, but if you're determined, you can visit them without a boat. Our estuaries are some of the most productive habitats in the world—and if you learn fishing rules, you can catch your dinner without any trouble. They abound with fish, clams, oysters and scallops, and are full of wading birds and waterfowl. These habitats offer something year round—but the peak times to visit them tend to be spring, summer and fall.

WETLANDS: The coastal wetlands that make up a good portion of the interior of our coast tend to provide the most challenges to visit. However, they're worth the effort. Winter is the best time for hiking and boating, since snakes, bugs and ticks are at rest. However, if you are able to visit these areas during warmer weather you're likely to see more interesting wildlife such as bears, alligators and perhaps even a wolf. We still have wilderness areas, and you need to make sure you're prepared when you enter these places. If you're a novice, use the improved access points that are available and as you get more adventurous—dive deeper into what these places have to offer by using local knowledge that you can seek out by simply taking some extra time to talk with people that live around these mysterious places.

Sunset Beach. Jo O'Keefe





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



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/dismw/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/caloo/index.htm

CENTRAL COAST





CENTRAL COAST:

White Oak River. 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. 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 onarkers 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 Obverbys 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. 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. 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.nccoastreserve.net/About-The-Reserve/Reserve-Sites/Rachel-Carson/58.aspx



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-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



Part of the Varnamtown fishing fleet.

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. Willetts, 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 unrestricted use had degraded the marshes

Black Crown Night Heron. Sam Bland (NCCF)



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.airliegardens.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



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