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Corolla horse tour



PHOTO BY THERESA G. MEDOFF

INTO THE WILD

From wildlife refuges to wild horses, nature is yours to explore in North Carolina's Outer Banks.

BY THERESA GAWLAS MEDOFF

I stand on a deserted stretch of Coquina Beach at Cape Hatteras National Seashore on an October afternoon watching waves crash against the sandy shore. All alone in this awe-inspiring setting, I find it hard to believe that just a short drive would put me smack-dab in the middle of tourist areas developed with sprawling beach houses and all manner of shops.

Cape Hatteras was the first National Seashore in the country, and I am thankful that back in 1937 the government had the foresight to protect these 30,000 acres of ocean beaches, sand dunes, marshes and woodland on the North Carolina barrier islands known as the Outer Banks.

I've come to the northern and central regions of the Outer Banks to experience the area's wilder side. That's easier to do in late fall after the departure of the 4 million-plus tourists who descend upon the beach destination from May to September. But even in the summer, there are ways to detach from the hullabaloo and immerse yourself in the region's natural attractions.



COURTESY OF OUTER BANKS VISITORS BUREAU

Hatteras Island



COURTESY OF U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Birdwatching at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge



COURTESY OF U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The Northern pintail

BIRD IS THE WORD

From Coquina Beach, I drive farther south on NC Highway 12, the main road running north-south through the Outer Banks, to Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, which is encompassed by Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Established in 1938, the refuge sets aside 5,834 acres of land, including 13 miles of pristine ocean beach, and 25,700 acres of Pamlico Sound waters for migratory birds and endangered and threatened species such as the loggerhead sea turtles that come ashore on summer nights to lay their eggs.

"People like to come here because it's really one of the only natural areas on the Outer Banks," says Cindy Heffley, visitor services specialist for the refuge. The "pea" that gave the refuge its name is actually a small trailing plant known as the Pea Island Pea that grows in the natural dunes; when the plants' tiny pink and lavender flowers mature, they form beans, or "dune peas," that thousands of snow geese feed on while overwintering in the refuge.

The twice-annual migration along the Atlantic Flyway makes spring and fall prime birdwatching seasons, and Pea Island is one of the best places in the region to witness the sight. As a result, the refuge serves as the primary location for the annual Wings Over Water Wildlife Festival. (This year's main session runs October 16-21, with an "Encore" session December 7-9.) Birdwatching at Pea Island can be rewarding in summer months, too, when herons, egrets, black-necked stilts and other shorebirds and waterfowl abound. Birdwatchers have tallied more than 365 species of birds living in or passing through the Outer Banks in the course of a year.

"Birder's paradise—that's what they call Pea Island Refuge, but there's a lot of other wildlife to see, too," Heffley says.

One of the best viewing spots in the refuge is along the North Pond Wildlife Trail near the visitor center. An easy half-mile portion of the trail runs along the dike between North Pond and New Field Pond. An observation tower at the end of this section of the dike allows for more sweeping views. If you're up for a longer trek, the entire loop trail is four miles long; but ask first if the biting insects are bothersome that day—it all depends on which way the wind is blowing.

Guided 90-minute bird walks are offered Fridays at 8 a.m. year-round, with a Wednesday morning walk added during the summer. Participants can expect to see dozens of bird species and perhaps other wildlife, too, such as river otters, mink, raccoons, deer and turtles, says volunteer Pat Moore.

As the afternoon wanes, I depart Pea Island Refuge and head back north to Nags Head and Jockey's Ridge State Park. The state park is the site of the largest and



Jockey's Ridge State Park

PHOTO BY THERESA G. MEDOFF

tallest active sand dune in the Eastern U.S. The main dune—there are other dunes in the park—covers a surface area of 150 acres and has a maximum height of 80 to 100 feet, depending on the wind and shifting sands.

It's fairly well known that the high dunes are the perfect launching pad for hang-gliders. (There was a reason that the Wright Brothers came to the Outer Banks for their test flights, after all). What's less known is that Jockey's Ridge has two short hiking trails through the sand that offer inspiring views of Roanoke Sound. Trekking across the shifting sands is challenging, but the awesome surroundings are worth it, I say to myself as I hike to a high point to catch the setting of the sun.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

The next morning, I head to Wanchese Harbor on Roanoke Island, where I meet up with Marc Mitchum, better known as Captain Marc, and board his 42-foot Chesapeake Bay deadrise the *Jodie Kae*. Officially, Mitchum's OBX Crabbing and Shrimping Charters has already stopped operating for the season, but Captain Marc has made an exception so that I can get a taste of the family-oriented trips he runs from Memorial Day to mid-October. During the busiest part of the summer, Mitchum runs three excursions a day to Roanoke and Croatan Sounds. Off-season, Captain Marc is a commercial waterman, but he's found that bringing tourists on crabbing and shrimping excursions is more lucrative, and besides, he enjoys introducing landlubbers to the waterman's life.

Twenty minutes out on the Roanoke Sound, we approach a buoy marking one of Mitchum's crab pots. He puts the boat in idle and yells over his shoulder, "Let's see what we've got!"

Using a large metal hook, I grab the rope attached to the pot. Captain Marc helps me to hoist the square steel-wire trap into the boat. Inside are a half-dozen blue crabs of varying sizes. Captain Marc pulls one out to give me a closer



Bodie Island lighthouse

PHOTO BY THERESA G. MEDOFF

look. It's a female. You can easily tell, Mitchum says, because "the females paint their nails"—that is, their claws are tipped in vibrant orange.

Mitchum directs me to hold the crab by pinching the hips near its rear legs, but I grab too quickly and end up grasping its body instead, allowing the wily creature to clamp its claws down with a vicelike grip on my pinky. I grimace, but Captain Marc springs to my rescue and detaches the crab. Next time, I'll do as instructed.

"This trip is about the experience. If you like to fish and hunt—people like that love it. But even if you don't, you'll enjoy it," Mitchum says. "I had people from Long Island [New York] on the boat, and they said this is something everybody should do, to see where their food comes from." Even better, when the excursion is over, guests leave with a bushel of crabs to steam for dinner.

After saying goodbye to Captain Marc, I drive the short distance to Manteo, where I meet Tyler Jackson of Kitty Hawk Kites at the company's waterfront store, one of about a dozen Kitty Hawk Kites locations in the Outer Banks. Jackson is my guide for a kayaking trip through the marshy canals just offshore from this historic waterfront town, which has served as the Dare County Seat since 1870.



Marc Mitchum, captain of the *Jodie Kae*

PHOTO BY THERESA G. MEDOFF



Wild horses in Corolla

COURTESY OF CURRITUCK OUTER BANKS

as the Colonial Spanish mustang lives on both ends of the Outer Banks: in the Carova neighborhood near Corolla on the northern tip of the Outer Banks and on Shackleford Banks, the southernmost island in Cape Lookout National Seashore. The horses are said to be descended from mustangs brought to the New World by Spanish explorers more than 500 years ago.

I join a dozen other horse-lovers for an excursion with Corolla Outback Adventures, one of several companies that take visitors out to see the horses in open-air 4x4s. Off-road vehicles are necessary because, while Route 12 officially continues to the state line, there is no paved road north of Corolla. Signs posted in the sand declare the 15 m.p.h. speed limit.

We take a bumpy, windblown drive along the beach, over dunes and through small neighborhoods with sand for streets. We're heading to the 60 acres of land that the Bender family, operators of Corolla Outback Adventures, has donated as a wild horse sanctuary. Here, away from the beach houses, is our surest bet for catching a glimpse of the horses. We see a few mahogany-colored mustangs, but at a distance.

As we're backtracking to the beach, one of our group yells out, "There are some horses. In that garage!" Sure enough, five curious horses have wandered into a garage left open by the homeowners. We wonder aloud what attracted them to the enclosure. Escape from the sun? The smell of food?

It's back on the beach, however, that we hit the mother lode. Forget horses in garages; this was the sight we'd all hoped to see: horses frolicking in the surf. There's even a foal among them. Cell phones and cameras click away as everyone tries to get the perfect Instagram.

Months later, those photos trigger rich memories of my time in the Outer Banks, and I realize it's the natural attractions that help to make these barrier islands a different kind of Atlantic beach getaway.

The "canals" that we kayak through are actually mosquito ditches built in the late 1800s and early 1900s to control mosquitos, Jackson explains. Luckily, insects aren't a problem today, and we spend a leisurely hour-and-a-half paddling among islands of black needle rush, sea oats, loblolly pine and red cedar, catching sight of cormorants, kestrels and a bluish-gray belted kingfisher with a tufted head that reminds me of a Mohawk haircut. Jackson pulls up alongside a concentration of wax myrtle, also known as Southern bayberry, and crushes a few leaves in his hand, holding it out so that I can sniff the distinctive sweet fragrance so popular for scenting holiday candles.

Back on land, I wander through a few of the shops downtown, admiring the work of a local potter and purchasing some North Carolina boiled peanuts. I'm not really in a browsing mood, though, so I head back to my hotel in Duck, the AAA Four Diamond Sanderling Resort, to sip a cocktail and watch the sun set over Currituck Sound.

HORSING AROUND

The next morning, I'm up early for the final wildlife encounter of my Outer Banks visit: the wild horses of Corolla. Officially designated North Carolina's state horse, the breed known

For more information on tourism in the Outer Banks, visit outerbanks.org.