

Cape Lookout

National Seashore
North Carolina

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sea, Sky, and Sand

Cape Lookout National Seashore is a low, narrow, ribbon of sand running from Ocracoke Inlet on the northeast to Beaufort Inlet on the southwest. These barrier islands—88 kilometers (55 miles) in length—consist mostly of wide, bare beaches with low dunes covered by scattered grasses, flat grasslands bordered by dense vegetation, and large expanses of salt marsh alongside the sound.

Wind, waves, and currents are continually at work reshaping these low-lying islands; one strong storm can create extensive changes. In such an environment only the most tenacious plants can survive the constant battle. Of the plants, the grasses are the most important, for their deep roots help to anchor the sand. For this reason, sea oats, a large grass with a grain-like head, is protected by law. **Please do not pick it.**

Human beings, too, have found this environment difficult to deal with but also protective and bountiful. One of the earliest maps that shows Cape Lookout dates from 1590 and calls the area "promontorium tremendum"—horrible headland—in recognition of the area's treacherous shoals. Behind the islands, however, are several sheltered anchorages that can shield a vessel from a Northeaster or, as in World War II, an enemy submarine. Fishing and whaling have for centuries been an important industry on the Outer Banks. In the 19th century, the small settlement of Diamond City on Shackleford Banks became famous for the excellent salted mullet it shipped. The secret lay not in the quality of fish, but in the care the Diamond City processors took in cleaning, salting, and packing the fish. Commercial fishing continues today as the forces of nature continue to shape and alter these islands.



It's easy to miss many of the special beauties of the seashore. We invite you to slacken your pace and explore the landscape, pondering what you see.



Delight can come from enjoying the ordinary such as gulls on pilings, whelk shells and sand dollars, or the abstract design created by trawlers on the mirror-like surface of the sea.



Discovering a sand mushroom is a special treat; you can spend hours reflecting on its creation. Marsh pinks lend a splash of color to this world of blue, green, and white.

Portsmouth village is quiet now that ships are too big to get to it, and some houses are succumbing to lush vines.

Today campers are the chief human inhabitants while the lighthouse stands sentinel over them and the marsh.



Varying Worlds

Plants and Animals In the area near Portsmouth Village, much of the land is awash at high tide; only a few areas support vegetation. Scattered groves of trees grow on Core Banks, particularly at Guthrie's Hammock. The Cape Lookout Bight area and Shackleford Banks have large dunes, and it is at Shackleford that you will find the most extensive maritime forest in the park. Vines are common and at war with the trees. The changing geography of the island produces the strange and beautiful "ghost forests" on the ocean side of the groves: trees killed by advancing sand and salt spray leave their sun-bleached skeletons protruding from the sand.

Mammals are uncommon on the islands; rice rats, rabbits, river otters, and raccoons are some of the native species found here. On Shackleford is a population of sheep, goats, cows, and horses that have gone wild. The islands are an excellent place to observe birds, particularly during spring and fall migrations. Occasionally, an arctic bird will appear, and a few pelagic, or open-sea, birds visit the area. In summer, a number of tern species, egrets, herons, and some shore birds nest in the park. On Core Banks are Fowler's toads and tree frogs; diamond-back terrapins and box turtles are also fairly

common. Loggerhead turtles come up on the beaches at nesting time. There are no known venomous reptiles.

People on the Islands From the time of the first human settlements, local inhabitants were interested in trade and fishing. Portsmouth was established by the North Carolina Assembly in 1753 as a point at which ships' cargoes could be lightered ashore for shipment to the mainland, or the ships could be sufficiently lightened to cross the bar and proceed to Beaufort, Bath, and other ports. A self-guiding walking tour tells you about the village's past. Important to fishing and shipping was the marking of shoals and safe channels. Lighthouses were crucial to this. The lighthouse at Cape Lookout Bight was completed in 1859 as a replacement for one built in 1812. It has survived hurricanes and war, and today is in a battle with the sea.

Cape Lookout National Seashore is a changing environment where nature, when left relatively undisturbed by man, maintains a balance. You can help be a part of this balancing act by observing park rules and regulations.

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A map of North Carolina showing major highways and coastal areas. The map includes labels for Virginia, North Carolina, Raleigh, Goldsboro, New Bern, Jacksonville, Beaufort, Morehead City, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, and Cape Lookout National Seashore. Major highways shown include I-95, I-77, I-85, I-70, I-17, I-158, and I-24. The map also shows the Pamlico River and the Pamlico Sound.

For basic information about Cape Lookout National Seashore, go first to the ranger station on Harkers Island. The visitor center at Ocracoke, which is part of Cape Hatteras National Seashore, can give you information on Portsmouth village and on how to reach it. Please respect private property rights in Portsmouth village. This park is undeveloped and has no maintained roads. There are no lifeguarded beaches; rip currents do occur along the beach and visitors should never swim alone. There are no camping facilities or concessions of any kind on the islands. Be prepared to carry with you everything you need. Nearby towns and villages on the mainland can provide you with most supplies that you will need.

Supplies and Shelter **Clothing:** There is little shade or shelter on the islands, so don't go without a shirt and a hat. **Water:** *Take it with you.* Water is a necessity and you can dehydrate quickly on the islands in hot weather. **Shelter:** Make sure your tent is strong and able to withstand wind.

Carry extra-long pegs for use in sand. Unless you have a particular liking for insect bites, make sure that your tent has a mosquito netting. From May to October (the insect season), camp near the beach in the open dunes where you can enjoy both a bit of breeze and protection from high winds. At other times of the year, you will find the shrub and grassland areas pleasant.

Conditions on the Islands **Trash:** Carry everything out with you. Burying trash causes problems, for disturbing any part of the natural system, including the water table, eventually destroys the rest. **Insects:** Yes, we have mosquitoes. So does almost every other part of the Atlantic coast. We also have sand gnats and chiggers. Bring an ample supply of repellent. On Shackleford Banks, check yourself daily for ticks, just as you would in any other woodland area. **Boating:** Make sure you have navigation charts aboard. Follow the marked channels. The sound is shallow, and it is easy to run aground.

Access Highways: A highway system connects Carteret County with metropolitan areas throughout the eastern United States. I-95, which passes within 160 kilometers (100 miles), connects via U.S. 70 and state roads to Harkers Island. The Intracoastal Waterway also passes near Beaufort enabling tourists to arrive by boat. **Ferries:** All access to the park itself is by toll ferry or private boat. There are no roads or bridges to the islands. Ferry service is available from Harkers Island and Beaufort to the Cape Lookout Bight area, from Davis to near Great Island, from Atlantic to an area north of Drum Inlet, and from Ocracoke to Portsmouth village. A toll ferry also sails from Ocracoke to Cedar Island. The ferries at Davis and Atlantic are equipped to transport 4-wheel drive vehicles. For ferry schedules and toll information, contact the Harkers Island Ranger Station.

Administration Cape Lookout National Seashore is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent's address is 3601 Bridges Street, Suite F, Morehead City, NC 28557-2913.

