

# Cape Lookout

National Seashore  
North Carolina

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

## Official Map and Guide



## Sky, Sea, Shells, and Sand

Cape Lookout National Seashore is a low, narrow, ribbon of sand running from Ocracoke Inlet on the northeast to Beaufort Inlet to the southwest. These barrier islands—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 big storm can bring about 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 even as the forces of nature continue to shape and alter these islands.



Clockwise from left: From the large whelk to the tiny sand dollar, shells are abundant in number and in variety on Cape Lookout's beaches.

Since 1859, the Cape Lookout lighthouse—the prototype for all of the Outer Banks lighthouses—has

been guiding mariners through hazardous waters.

Chartered in 1753, Portsmouth Village was one of the first settlements in the region. It once was home to more than 1,000 people; today it is uninhabited.

Grasses such as the sea oat (*Uniola paniculata*) act as the "glue" of the islands. Without its root system, the protective dunes would quickly

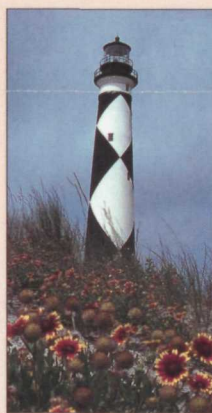
erode and the land would wash away.

Seagulls are among the more than 275 species of birds that can be spotted in the park.

Loggerhead sea turtles, a threatened species, thrive in Cape Lookout's waters. Sections of the beach are closed to visitors during nesting times.



Loggerhead sea turtle



Lighthouse



Portsmouth Village



Seagulls on pilings



Sea oat grass

## 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 abundant—and are 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—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.

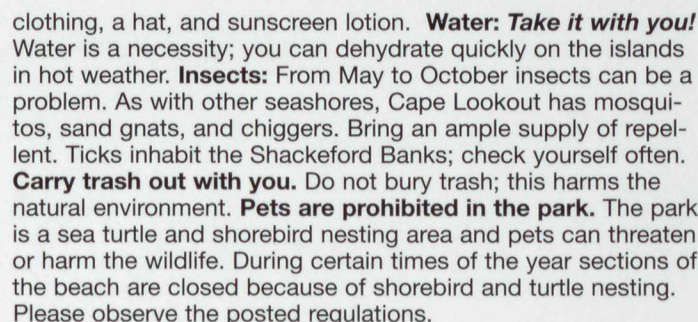
Cape Lookout National Seashore is a changing environment where nature, when left relatively undisturbed by man, maintains a balance. You can help be a part of this balancing act by observing park rules and regulations.





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**Camping:** There are no developed camping facilities in the park. During insect season, you will benefit from the ocean breeze if you camp near the beach. At other times of the year, you will find the shrub and grassland areas pleasant. Make sure your tent is strong and able to withstand wind and that it has adequate mosquito netting. Carry extra-long pegs that will hold in sand. **Swimming:** Swimming is not recommended; there are no lifeguarded beaches. Rip currents do occur along the beach, creating dangerous water conditions. **Boating:** Make sure you have current navigational charts aboard and follow marked channels. Because the sound is shallow, it is easy to run aground.

Cape Lookout National Seashore is part of the National Park System, one of more than 370 parks that are important examples of the nation's natural and cultural heritage. For further information, write to: Superintendent, Cape Lookout National Seashore, 131 Charles Street, Harkers Island, NC 28531; or connect to [www.nps.gov/calo](http://www.nps.gov/calo) on the Internet.

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The best place to begin your visit to Cape Lookout National Seashore is at the park's visitor center on Harkers Island. From I-95 take U.S. 70 east to Otway, N.C.; follow signs to the visitor center. There are no roads or bridges to the national seashore islands; all access is by toll ferry or private boat. Ferry service to the seashore is available from local communities. A North Carolina state ferry travels between Cedar Island and Ocracoke, N.C. Some of the park's concession ferries are equipped to carry 4-wheel-drive vehicles. For ferry schedules and toll information, call the Harkers Island Visitor Center at 919-728-2250.

**Facilities:** The park is largely undeveloped and has no maintained roads. There is a picnic area on the mainland by the visitor center; restrooms are few and far between. **Supplies:** Be prepared to carry with you everything you need. There are no stores or restaurants on the islands. Nearby towns and villages can provide you with most supplies. **Clothing:** There is little shade or shelter on the islands, so be sure to bring protective

