

# Cape Lookout

National Seashore  
North Carolina

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## 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—56 miles long—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. The grasses are the most important plants because their deep roots help anchor the sand. All plants in the park are protected by law. Please do not pick them.

Humans, too, have found this environment difficult 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 are several sheltered anchorages that can shield a vessel from a Northeaster or, as in World War II, an enemy submarine. For centuries fishing and whaling have been an important industry on the Outer Banks. In the 19th century, the 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.



From the large whelk to the tiny sand dollar (left) shells are abundant in number and in variety on Cape Lookout's beaches.

Loggerhead sea turtles—a threatened species—thrive in the waters of Cape Lookout. Sections of the beach are closed to vehicles during nesting times.

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. Seagulls are among the more than 275 species of birds that

can be spotted in the park.

Grasses such as the sea oats (*Uniola paniculata*) act as an anchor of the islands. Without their root system, protective dunes would quickly erode, and the land would wash away.



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 Guthries 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 Banks is a population of horses that has gone wild and adapted to their environment over the past few hundred years. The islands are an excellent place to observe birds, particularly during spring and fall migrations. Occasionally, an arctic bird appears, and a few pelagic—birds of the open sea—visit the area. In summer, a number of tern species, egrets, herons, and some shorebirds nest in the park. On Core Banks are Fowler's toads, tree frogs, and diamond-back terrapins.

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

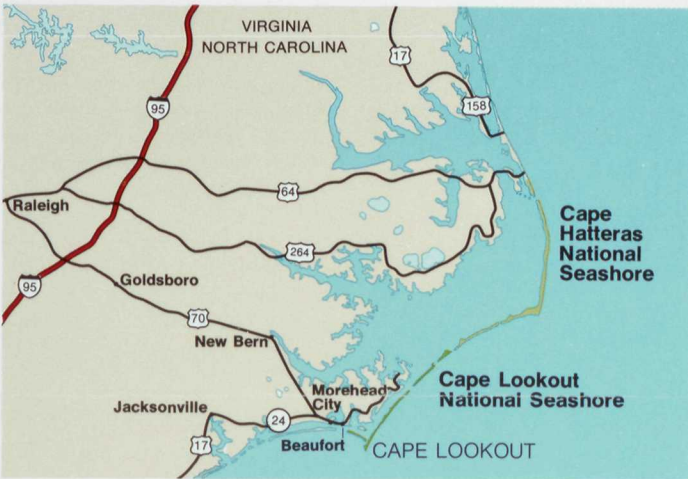
**People on the Islands** From the time of the first human settlements, local inhabitants were interested in trade and fishing. Portsmouth Village was established by the North Carolina assembly in 1753. The village served as a lightering port for the heavily loaded ships that could navigate the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean but not the shallow waters of the sounds. Goods were unloaded at Portsmouth Village, stored in warehouses, and transported to mainland areas by smaller boats that could navigate the shallow sounds. 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.

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





# Exploring Cape Lookout



## Visiting the Park

The best place to begin your visit to Cape Lookout National Seashore is at the park's visitor center on Harkers Island. The visitor center is open daily from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; it is closed on December 25 and January 1. 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 252-728-2250.

### Conditions on the Islands

**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 on the mainland can provide you with most of your supplies.

**Clothing:** There is little shade or shelter on the islands, so be sure to bring protective clothing, a hat, and sunscreen lotion. **Water:** *Take it with you!* Water is a necessity; you can dehydrate quickly on the islands in hot weather. **Insects:** From May to October insects can be a problem. As with other seashores, Cape Lookout has mosquitoes, sand gnats, and chiggers. Bring an ample supply of repellent. Ticks inhabit Shackleford Banks; check yourself often. **Carry trash out with you.** Do not bury trash; this harms the natural environment. Pets on a six-foot leash are allowed in the park. The park is a sea turtle and shorebird nesting area, and pets can threaten or harm the wildlife. During certain times of the year sections of the beach are closed because of shorebird and turtle nesting. Please observe the posted regulations.

### Activities

**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 that 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.

### Administration

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.

### More Information

Write: Superintendent, Cape Lookout National Seashore, 131 Charles Street, Harkers Island, NC 28531. Call: 252-728-2250. Internet: [www.nps.gov/caloc](http://www.nps.gov/caloc).

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