

# 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 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 protective and bountiful. A 1590 map of Cape Lookout calls the area *promontorium tremendum*—"horrible headland"—in recognition of the area's treacherous shoals. Behind the islands are sheltered anchorages that can shield a vessel from a Northerner or, as in World War II, an enemy submarine. For centuries whaling and fishing were important industries on the Outer Banks. In the 19th century the settlement of Diamond City on Shackleford Banks was famous for the excellent salted mullet it shipped. The secret lay not in the quality of fish but in the care Diamond City processors took in cleaning, salting, and packing the fish. Today, commercial fishing continues even as the forces of nature shape and alter these islands.



From the large whelk to the 5-petaled sand dollar (left) shells are abundant in number and variety on Cape Lookout's beaches. Sea shells are made by living animals. If you find a shell with a live creature inside, please put it back in the same spot—this is that animal's home.

beach are closed to vehicles during nesting times.

1,000 people; today it is uninhabited.

Since 1859 the Cape Lookout lighthouse has guided mariners through hazardous waters. It served as the prototype for all of the Outer Banks lighthouses.

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

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

Loggerhead sea turtles—a threatened species—thrive in the waters of Cape Lookout. Sections of the

Chartered in 1753, Portsmouth Village was one of the first settlements in the region. It once was home to more than



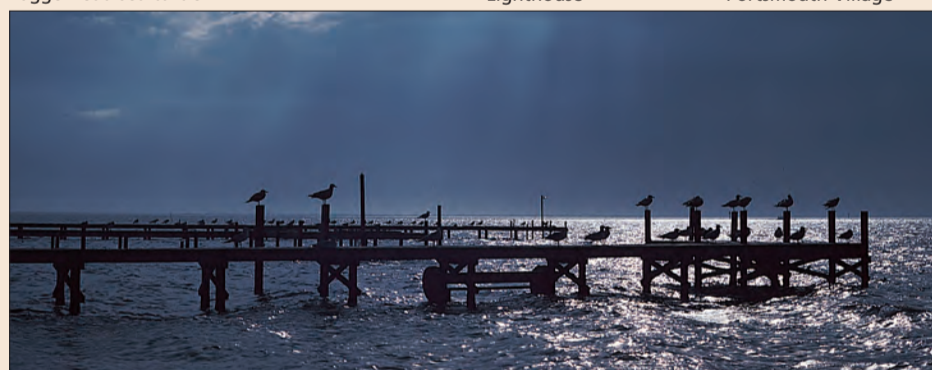
Loggerhead sea turtle



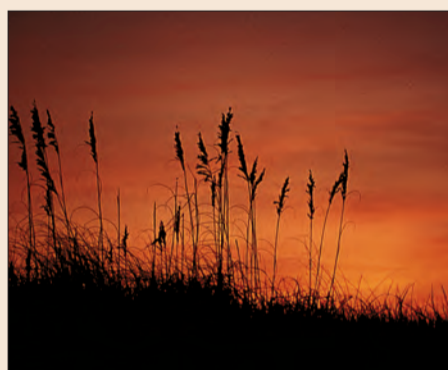
Lighthouse



Portsmouth Village



Seagulls on pilings



Sea oat grass

## Varying Worlds

**Plants and Animals** 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 at Shackleford you will find the park's most extensive maritime forest. The abundant vines seem to be at war with the trees. The island's changing geography produces strange and beautiful "ghost forests"—trees killed by advancing sand and salt spray leave their sun-bleached skeletons protruding from the sand.

Rabbits, river otters, and raccoons are some of the native mammals found here. On Shackleford Banks horses have become wild and adapted to their environment over the past centuries. The islands are an excellent place to see birds, particularly during spring and fall migrations. Occasionally an arctic bird appears, and a few pelagic (birds of the open sea) visit the area. A number of tern species, egrets, herons, and shorebirds nest here. On Core Banks are Fowler's toads, tree frogs, and diamond-back terrapins. Loggerhead turtles climb 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. Marking the shoals and safe channels was important to fishing and shipping. Lighthouses were crucial to this effort. The lighthouse at Cape Lookout Bight was completed in 1859 as a replacement for one built in 1812. It has survived hurricanes and war.

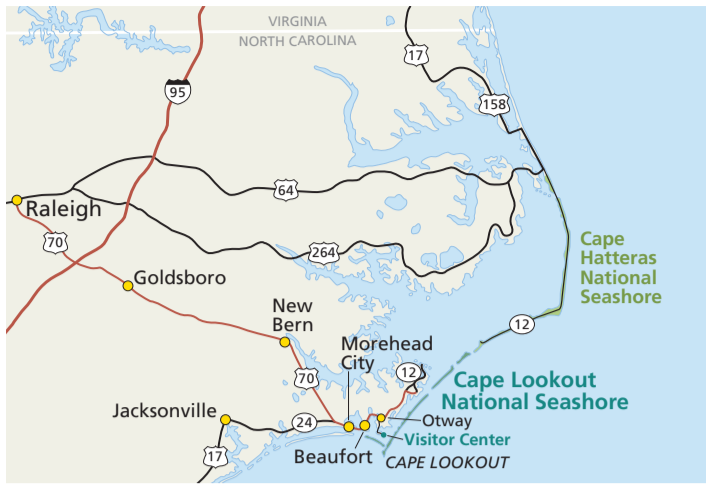
Cape Lookout National Seashore is a changing environment where nature, when left relatively undisturbed by humans, maintains a balance. You can be a part of this balancing act by observing park regulations. Please help us protect this park for you and for future generations.

Spiny sea star and quahog clam

ALL PHOTOS: NPS



# Exploring Cape Lookout



## Visiting the Park

Start your visit to Cape Lookout National Seashore at the visitor center on Harkers Island, open daily except December 25 and January 1. From I-95 take U.S. 70 east to Otway, N.C., and follow the signs to the visitor center. No roads or bridges go to the national seashore islands; all access is by toll ferry or private boat. Nearby towns offer ferry services to these islands. A North Carolina state ferry goes between Cedar Island and Ocracoke, N.C. Some park-concession ferries carry 4-wheel-drive vehicles. For ferry schedules and toll information contact the park or check for "Ferry Services" at [www.nps.gov/caloc](http://www.nps.gov/caloc).

### Conditions on the Islands

**Facilities:** The park is undeveloped and has no maintained roads. A picnic area is on the mainland by the visitor center; restrooms are few and far between. **Supplies:** *Be prepared to carry with you everything you need.* The islands have no stores or restaurants. Nearby mainland towns offer most supplies.

**Clothing:** There is little shade or shelter on the islands, so bring protective clothing, a hat, and sunscreen. **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. Cape Lookout has mosquitoes, sand gnats, and chiggers. Bring ample insect repellent. Ticks live on Shackleford Banks; check yourself often. **Trash:** *Carry all trash out with you.* Do not bury trash; this harms the natural environment. **Pets:** 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 wildlife.* At certain times of year sections of beach are closed to protect shorebird and turtle nesting. Please observe posted regulations.

### Activities

**Camping:** The park has no developed camping facilities. Camp near the beach in insect season to catch the ocean breeze. At other times, shrub and grassland areas offer more pleasant camping. Make sure your tent is strong, can withstand wind, and has adequate mosquito netting. Carry extra-long pegs that hold in sand. **Swimming:** There are no lifeguarded beaches. Rip currents occur along the beach, creating dangerous water conditions. *Never swim alone. Use caution in and around the water, and watch children closely.* **Boating:** Make sure you have current navigational charts aboard and follow marked channels. Because the sound is shallow, it is easy to run aground.

### For More Information

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

©GPO:2007-330-358/00717 Reprint. 2007  
Printed on recycled paper.

