

Cumberland Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Seashore
Georgia



Forests so quiet that you can hear yourself breathe, sunlight filtered and diffused through over-arching trees and vines, sounds of small animals scurrying in the underbrush, the gentle splash of water moving through the salt marsh, the courting bellow of the alligator, blinding light on water and sand as you emerge from the shadows of the live oak forest, a standing row of slave cabin chimneys, fallow gardens and crumbling walls of mansions

from bygone eras. This is Cumberland Island, Georgia's largest and southernmost barrier island and today a national seashore.

The word "seashore" is misleading, for Cumberland Island is a complex ecological system of interdependent animal and plant communities. Each lends itself to the preservation of the other. A system of foredunes protects the interdune meadow and shrub thickets. A

canopy of live oak trees stretches out just beyond the back dunes that provide protection from the salt spray. In central and northern sections of the island, pine trees tower over hardwood forests. On the western side of the island, saltwater marshes pulse with the tidal flow. Because the previous owners maintained Cumberland Island in its natural state, nature still reigns on this land that bears the imprint of humankind.

Saltwater marsh



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Maritime forest



A. Blake Gardner

Beach



A. Blake Gardner

Approaching the island from St. Marys, Ga., the marshes first come into view. When the tide is out, the marsh appears like a broad plain of tall grasses intricately interwoven with tidal creeks. Closer examination reveals an array of birds wading through the grass or feeding at the banks of the creeks. Fiddler crabs scurry across the mud flats and eat decaying vegetation and other organic material. Raccoons and other animals come down from the uplands to feed on crabs and to search for shellfish.

When the tide is in, the tops of the grasses sway with the current, making it hard to distinguish between grass and water, the color of one intensifying the color of the other. These tides play a vital role in the life of the marsh, for on their flood cycle they bring the microscopic organisms that many creatures need for nourishment and the water that they need from which to draw oxygen. On their ebb, the tides flush the silt and debris washed into the marsh from the inland rivers out to sea. The marshes buffer the landward side of the island from the twice daily influx of tidal flow and absorb some of the impact of storms. Marshes possess quiet, changeable beauty, yet they are the most productive land, acre per acre, on the planet. With their wealth of nutrients, marshes support large populations of fish, shellfish, plants, and birdlife. They also act as nurseries. In the grasses and shallow waters here the young of many species begin their lives protected from predators.

As the marshlands become higher and drier, washed only at extremely high tides, the salt-tolerant communities give way to freshwater-loving plants and then, finally, to trees. The most striking feature of the live oak forest is the solitude. Even the air seems to move noiselessly above the tops of the trees' arching branches. The sounds of an ordinary rain-shower are muted by the dense canopy of leaves and vines. Cradled in the branches, resurrection ferns spring up with this life-giving moisture. Draping Spanish moss lends a touch of the exotic as it sways in the breeze. The vivid plumage of painted buntings, summer tanagers, cardinals, and pileated woodpeckers add a splash of color to the somber hues of the forest while the clear notes of yellow-throated warblers and Carolina wrens punctuate the stillness.

Deeper in the forest's shadows at midday, or in interdune meadows at dusk, you may catch fleeting images of the island's many white-tailed deer. Raccoons, the masked bandits of the forest, are often seen as they tour the island on nightly forays. You may come across a shy and newly arrived resident, the armadillo, first seen on Cumberland in 1974. The interdune meadows, both wet and dry, mark the forest's eastern edge. Their sand and grass give way to the realm of dunes and beach. Farther inland, freshwater ponds appear like jewels. Here on a warm spring night you can hear the booming of the bull alligator as it goes through its courtship rites. Rainfall sustains the ponds and in turn the wildlife that are drawn to them, adding yet another dimension to the island.

Emerging from the darkness of the forest to the brightness of the beach you momentarily lose your sight, so sudden is the change. On the beach the waters rise and fall twice daily, washing to and fro over the sand, shaping and rearranging. The wind, too, plays a role in this process. Barrier islands appear to be permanent, but actually they are continually in the process of change. In some areas on Cumberland Island, you may notice the dunes covering the shrubs and trees in their path. The plants that grow on the dunes are the stabilizing element. Their root systems are fragile and are affected by the impact of humans and animals. Overgrazing by the island's feral horses may impair the ability of some grasses to reproduce.

Here the shorebirds are given to the spirit of movement. Sandpipers dance before the rhythmic advance and retreat of the water, and gulls soar on the ocean breeze. An osprey may dive into a wave before your eyes and a few seconds later emerge with a mullet in its talons. Loggerhead turtles, ancient reptiles of the sea, lumber ashore on Cumberland's deserted beaches at night. Guided by instinct, they lay their eggs and then return to the sea. Hatchlings emerge about 60 days later and scurry for the protection of the surf. Today tracks of humans, birds, and other animals mark the beach. Tomorrow they will have been swept away, and the beach will take on new configurations.

Drawings: Casey French Alexander
Background photo: A. Blake Gardner

The Human Imprint



Plum Orchard Mansion

For thousands of years people have lived on Cumberland Island, but never in such numbers as to permanently alter the character of the landscape. Piles of shells, called middens, provide us with clues to the lives of the Indians who left them. An occasional pot shard indicates that Spanish soldiers and missionaries were here in the mid-1500s. No signs remain of Fort William and Fort St. Andrews, built to protect British interests. Revolutionary War hero Gen. Nathanael Greene purchased land on Cumberland Island in 1783. His widow, Catherine Greene, constructed a four-story tabby home that she named Dungeness. In the 1890s, The Settlement was established for black workers. The First African

Baptist Church, established in 1893 and rebuilt in the 1930s, is one of the few remaining structures of this community. Thomas Carnegie, began building and partner with the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, began building, with his wife Lucy, on Dungeness's foundations in 1884. The ruins of this mansion remain today. Plum Orchard, an 1898 Georgian Revival mansion built for son George and his wife Margaret Thaw, was donated to the National Park Foundation by Carnegie family members in 1971. Their contribution, as well as funds from supporting foundations, helped win Congressional approval for establishing Cumberland Island National Seashore.

Cumberland Island

Enjoying the Park



Ferry Information A passenger ferry serves Cumberland Island from St. Marys daily except December through February, when it doesn't run on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. It doesn't carry cars, bicycles, or pets. It departs the mainland at 9:00 and 11:45 a.m. and the island at 10:15 a.m. and 4:45 p.m. From March through November it also departs the island at 2:45 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. Ferry reservations may be made up to six months in advance. Call toll free 1-888-817-3421, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. *If you miss the last ferry departing the island, you must charter a boat for the return trip.*

Fees and Supplies Fees are charged for ferry service, entrance to Cumberland Island, and camping. No supplies are available on the island. *You must bring all your supplies with you.* There is drinking water at the visitor center, museum, ranger station, and Sea Camp Beach campground. Walking shoes and raingear are recommended.

Camping All camping is limited to seven days. The developed campground at Sea Camp Beach has restrooms, cold showers, and drinking water. Campfires are permitted at Sea Camp, but only dead-and-down wood may be used. No backcountry sites—Brickhill Bluff, Yankee Paradise, Hickory

Hill, or Stafford Beach—have any facilities. Backcountry campsites have wells nearby; the *water should be treated*. Campfires are not permitted, so bring portable stoves. Both a camping permit and a reservation are required. Get permits at the Sea Camp Ranger Station; for camping reservations call toll free 1-888-817-3421, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Fishing Georgia state fishing laws apply.

Weather Cumberland Island winters are short and mild. Summer temperatures range from the 80s°F to the low 90s. In summer it is best to visit the beach early or late in the day and to find shade in the hot, midday hours.



Private Property Some of Cumberland Island is privately owned. Respect the rights of landowners and do not trespass.

Safety The Dungeness ruins and outbuildings are closed to the public. They are unstable and unsafe—and diamondback rattlesnakes, one of three poisonous snakes here, live in the ruins. • Check yourself often and carefully for ticks, which carry Lyme Disease. • There are no lifeguards. • During periodic managed hunts the wilderness area is closed to the public. • Don't approach feral horses; they are dangerous. Feeding any wildlife is both prohibited and dangerous.

Information This is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. Contact: Cumberland Island National Seashore P.O. Box 806 St. Marys, GA 31558 www.nps.gov/cuis

The National Park Service website is www.nps.gov.

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