

Great Egg Harbor River

Great Egg Harbor
National Scenic and Recreational River
New Jersey



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Great Egg Harbor River at Weymouth Furnace



Great Egg Harbor River at Piney Hollow Road



Canoeing in the river corridor



Great Egg Harbor River marshlands

Photos by Michael Hogan unless noted

The Great Egg Harbor River corridor illustrates the intricate links between life and landscape in southern New Jersey. From the days of native Lenape Indians and early Dutch settlers, the river and surrounding sandy flatlands have shaped and been shaped by farmers, ironworkers, shipbuilders, fishermen, and glassblowers. Some trades have disappeared over the years, but many still reflect traditional ways of life tied to the land and the waterways.

Starting as a trickle near Berlin, New Jersey, the Great Egg Harbor River gradually widens as it picks up the waters of 17 designated tributaries on its way to Great Egg Harbor and the Atlantic Ocean. In its 59-mile southeasterly course, the river passes through or by pine and cedar forests, vegetable and fruit farms, large and small communities, office and industrial sites, county parks and state wildlife management areas. As the river flows on, the waters become

increasingly tea-colored with iron and with tannin dissolved from cedar roots and fallen leaves. A dam at Mays Landing holds back the river to form Lake Lenape. Below the dam the river widens and the "cedar waters" become mixed with the tidal saltwater of the ocean.

Much of the adjacent acreage is privately owned, so river access is limited, but roadways at many points afford views of the waterway and

expansive marshlands. As they have for centuries, these marshes serve as major feeding, resting, and breeding havens for waterfowl on the east coast. Dutch explorers in the 1600s were so astonished by all the breeding birds and eggs at the mouth of the river that they named the bay Great Egg Harbor, and the river subsequently took on the same moniker.

Established by Congress in 1992, the national scenic and recreational river

includes three free-flowing segments totaling 39.5 miles of the Great Egg Harbor River, plus 89.5 miles of 17 tributaries. This National Park System unit is unusual in that local jurisdictions continue to administer the lands. The National Park Service manages the designated river in partnership with the state, four counties, and twelve municipalities to protect the corridor's valuable natural and cultural values for present and future generations to appreciate and enjoy.



Snow geese are common in the Great Egg Harbor River corridor.

Life in the Pinelands

Nearly all of the Great Egg Harbor River system lies within an area of more than one million acres traditionally known as the Pine Barrens and federally protected as the Pinelands National Reserve.

Two key ingredients make up this largely undeveloped landscape: sand and water. The sand, deposited by an ancient river more than 20 million years ago, is more than 95 percent silica, so the water that percolates through it is low in organic matter and high in acidity.

The water quickly seeps through layers of sand and beds of gravel to form one of North America's largest underground reservoirs, or aquifers, holding 17 trillion gallons of fresh, drinkable water. On the surface, numerous bogs, swamps, and marshes dot the landscape. Natural vegetation in the Pinelands varies with moisture and elevation. Pitch



Pines and oaks prevail in the uplands.

pine and scrub oak, with an understory of blueberry and huckleberry, dominate the dry uplands.

In the lowlands, where moisture and organic matter are relatively more abundant, red maple and tupelo trees dominate with blueberry, sweetbay magnolia, holly, sweet pepperbush, and swamp azaleas filling in along the waterways. Stands of white cedar grow in the swampier areas,

which are carpeted with sphagnum moss, grasses, cranberries, and pitcher plants. Tidal marshes around the lower portions of the river system are filled with salt-tolerant grasses.

Deer, chipmunks, squirrels, and turtles are commonly seen along the river. Seen less often are such nocturnal animals as raccoons, opossums, skunks, foxes, brown bats, and muskrats.

Amphibians include the Pine Barrens tree frog and southern gray tree frog, both of which are endangered species in the state. Among the few fish species that can live in the acidic waters, pickerel are the most abundant. Two sunfish, the banded and black-banded, live almost exclusively in the Pinelands.

In the tidal waters below Lake Lenape, clams, mussels, and crabs multiply in the protein-rich marshes, mudflats, creeks, and harbor. The lower wetlands are spawning and nursery habitats for alewives, American shad, and striped bass. Here, too, thousands of sea birds nest and breed, and thousands of waterfowl and other birds stop to feed and rest during their semi-annual migrations.

Symbolic of all the burgeoning wildlife, rare peregrine falcons and bald eagles are increasingly sighted in havens along the Great Egg Harbor River.

"Many a drawing I made at Great Egg Harbor, many a pleasant day I spent along its shores," painter-naturalist John James Audubon wrote in his diary.

After failing at a few business ventures, Audubon wandered about the United States producing paintings of different bird species, which he later published as *The Birds of America*. His travels included visits to New Jersey.

Born in Haiti and reared in France, Audubon moved in 1803 to a family estate outside Philadelphia. He spent a few years there and visited the city later in life to promote sales of his bird portraits.

In 1829 he bargained with a fisherman to take him across the bay to the Great Egg Harbor area to sketch and do some "shooting and fishing, with long excursions in the surrounding swamps and marshes." He stayed at the "house of a veteran fisherman and gunner" whose daughter was as "wild as a Sea Gull" and whose wife served a meal of oysters "as large and white as any I have eaten."

Audubon's fish hawk, or osprey, clutching its next meal



Vesper sparrow



Field sparrow



Seaside sparrow



Long-billed marsh wren

"Dawn in New Jersey in June is worth a better description than I can furnish," Audubon wrote. "... the moment the sunbeams blazed over the horizon, the loud and mellow notes of the Meadow Lark saluted our ears. ... I saw several Fish Hawks' [ospreys] nests on the tallest trees. ... Except for the Florida Keys, Great Egg Harbor probably affords the naturalist as varied a field as any part of our Atlantic seaboard. Birds, fishes, and testaceous [hard-shelled] animals abound. ...

"I passed several weeks here. ... one day in search of Herons breeding in the swamps. ... another among the joyously crying Marsh Hens. ... or among the White-breasted Sea Gulls. ... or watched the gay Terns dance in the air before they plunged after tiny fry in the waters." And, as indicated by these paintings, he closely observed a variety of sparrows and native plants.

Today, the family estate is the Mill Grove/Audubon Wildlife Sanctuary, and the Great Egg Harbor River area remains one of the best bird-watching spots on the east coast.

Reproduced from *The Birds of America* by John James Audubon. From the collection of Mill Grove—Audubon Wildlife Sanctuary, Audubon, PA.

Fishing, Ironmaking, and Blueberrying

Long before Europeans arrived in North America, the Lenape settled in this region and traveled about the waterways in their canoes. The Lenape hunted deer and elk, caught herring and shad in fish weirs, gathered berries and fruits, harvested clams and oysters, and raised corn, beans, and squash.

The Dutch first settled along the coast and up the riverways in the early 1600s and made their living primarily from fishing, trading, and, later, shipbuilding. The discovery of swamps full of rot-resistant cedars bolstered the shipbuilding and timbering industries in the Pinelands. Mays Landing was founded in the 1740s as both a port and shipbuilding town. Swedes and other Europeans moved into the area. During and after the American Revolution, pacifist Quakers, bootleggers, smugglers, and pirates sought refuge in the pine forests.



Estellville Glassworks



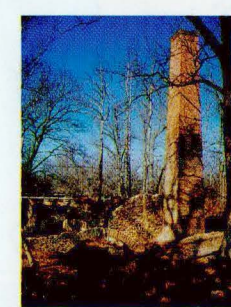
In season, farm markets dot the roadsides.

Individualism became an enduring characteristic of Pinelands residents.

After the discovery of bog iron ore, furnaces were established to produce pig iron from which cast iron products were forged. Trees were harvested to make charcoal to burn in the furnaces. Gradually the settlers formed villages and built roadways to transport their goods. The iron industry thrived

until the mid-1800s when higher quality iron ore was discovered in Pennsylvania, where coal could power the furnaces.

With so much sand in this region of New Jersey, it is no wonder that glass-making blossomed in the mid-1700s. Glass manufacturing flourished for nearly a century and continues in varying degrees today in a few nearby communities.



Weymouth Furnace

In the early 1800s entrepreneurs started making paper from salt grass fibers and from rags, but that industry lasted only about 100 years. While some industries have come and gone, agriculture continues to be the area's main economic force. With such extensive flatlands and so much water close to the surface, it is not surprising that the area has many farms raising vegetables, fruits, and berries and that New Jersey is known as the Garden State.

As the riverway flows on and the tides move in and out, the evolving lives of plants, wildlife, and humans continue to be linked inextricably with the subtleties of the land.

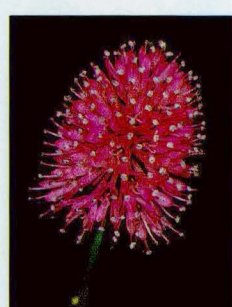


Great blue heron

Wetlands and hardwood swamps along the river provide habitat for rare and endangered species such as the Pine Barrens tree frog.



Courtesy of the Wetlands Institute



Encompassing extensive bogs and other wetlands, southern New Jersey is home to more than 25 species of delightful orchids and other wildflowers.

Clumps of swamp pink, a threatened species listed under the Endangered Species Act, are typically found in wetlands at the beginnings of streams and along meandering streamlets.

Like illustrator John James Audubon, you can spend many a pleasant day just watching and studying the birds and other wildlife, but you also can pursue many other recreational activities along the Great Egg Harbor River and its tributaries.

Drive the roadways throughout the river corridor, visit some of the parks and wildlife areas, and wander about the historic villages.

Picnic by the riverbank at Weymouth Furnace County Park and try to picture the small ironworks community that was located there from 1802 to 1862. Representative of many former ironworks in the state, Weymouth Furnace produced water pipes, pots, stoves, and, during the War of 1812, cannonballs. The remains of two paper mills that succeeded the ironworks can still be seen at this canoe access point to the Great Egg Harbor River.

Walk the trails at Estell Manor County Park for a capsule view of typical Pineclads habitats from oak, pine, and cedar woodlands to ponds, swamps, and marshes. The park also contains partial ruins of the Estellville Glassworks, which produced bottles and window glass from 1825 to 1877, and the foundations and railroad beds of the here-today, gone-tomorrow Bethlehem Loading Co. The factory was built to produce munitions during World War I. Ground was broken in March 1918, and the plant was produced by July, and a whole town was completed by August for 400 families and 3,000 single persons. The war ended November 11, and the plant closed in 1919.

Devote some time to looking at architectural styles in the historic seafaring towns of Somers Point and Mays Landing, the seat of government and one of the oldest communities in Atlantic County. On Shore Road at Somers Point, tour Somers Mansion, a three-story brick mansion built in 1725 overlooking Great Egg Harbor, and view Lenape artifacts, shipbuilding implements, and Victorian furniture at the Atlantic County Historical Society's museum. Artifacts from the wreck of the *Sindia* are on display at the Ocean City Historical Museum at 409 Wesley Avenue, Ocean City.

These few suggestions are indicative of what you might find as you explore the county parklands, state wildlife management areas, federal refuges, and communities throughout the region.

Recreational Activities and Travel Services
Public parklands in the Great Egg Harbor River area are listed in the chart at right along with the facilities and recreational opportunities they provide. A few recreational tips and basic park information are listed below. Call these county chambers of commerce for additional travel information: Atlantic 1-888-228-4748; Gloucester 856-384-6930; Camden 856-427-6166; and Cape May 609-884-5508.

Camping/Lodging Public camping sites are noted on the chart and map. For information on private campgrounds and other accommodations, contact the chambers of commerce at the telephone numbers listed above.

Canoeing/Kayaking/Tubing Public access points on the rivers are shown on the chart and map. Several firms rent canoes and kayaks and provide transportation services; call the Atlantic County Chamber of Commerce at 1-888-228-4748.

Boating In the spring and summer, boating is a popular activity on the wider stretches of the Great Egg Harbor River and some tributaries. A license is required for motorized boats. Public boat ramps are shown on the map. Several commercial marinas also are located along the rivers.

Swimming The rivers usually are deep enough for wading and, in some places, swimming. Currents can be swift and unpredictable. Wear protective footwear and never swim alone.

Fishing Other than pickerel and a few other species, do not expect to find many fish in the freshwater section of the Great Egg Harbor River. Fishing in the tidal portion, however, can be rewarding. A fishing license is required in the freshwater and generally in the brackish waters.

Wildlife/Bird Watching
A great variety of birds and other wildlife can be seen along the designated riverway and throughout southern New Jersey. See the chart and map.

Special Events Numerous fairs and festivals are held throughout the year, especially during the summer; contact area chambers of commerce. October is New Jersey Pinelands Month; telephone The Pinelands Preservation Alliance at 609-894-8000.

Camden County Parklands
Great Egg Harbor River begins in the north at Berlin Park and meanders through New Brooklyn Park. For information about these recreation areas, call 856-795-7275.

Atlantic County Parklands
Most of the designated riverway runs through Atlantic County, which operates several parklands featuring outdoor recreation, nature studies, and historical sites. They range in size from 20-acre Penny Pot Park to the 1,800-acre Estell Manor County Park. For information about Penny Pot, Estell Manor, Lake Lenape, Gaskill, River Bend, and Powell Creek parklands, call Atlantic County Division of Parks and Recreation at 609-645-5960.

State Wildlife Areas
The Great Egg Harbor River and its tributaries flow by or through several state wildlife management areas (WMA). Visit these woodlands and wetlands for such passive recreational pursuits as bird watching, hiking, and photography. Hunting of deer, squirrels, and some birds is permitted in season; a state hunting license is required. For information, write to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Fish and Wildlife, 501 East State Street, P.O. Box 400, Trenton, NJ 08625-0400, or call 609-292-1599.

Related Areas
Several nearby sites are related thematically to the Great Egg Harbor River. The **Cape May National Wildlife Refuge** and the **Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge** protect wetlands, dunes, and other habitats critical to the survival of the songbirds and waders migrating through the Atlantic Flyway. For information about the Cape May Refuge, write to the refuge manager at 24 Kimbles Beach Road, Cape May Court House, NJ 08210-2078; telephone 609-463-0994. For information about Forsythe's Brigantine and Barnegat divisions north of Atlantic City, write to the refuge manager at Great Creek Road, P.O. Box 72, Oceanville, NJ 08231; telephone 609-652-1665.

The Maurice National Scenic and Recreational River west of the Great Egg Harbor River, protects critical habitat on the Atlantic Flyway along the Maurice and Manumuskun rivers and the Menantico and Muskee creeks. This 35-mile waterway empties into the Delaware Bay. Call 215-597-9175.

The New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail Route is a vehicular tour route interpreting cultural and natural history sites along the Delaware Bay and Atlantic Ocean. Write to the National Park Service, P.O. Box 568, Newport, NJ 08345, or call 609-447-0103. (www.nps.gov/neje)

