

Cape Hatteras

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Seashore
North Carolina



Bodie Island Lighthouse with boardwalk
NPS / KURT MOSES

A thin, broken strand of islands curves out into the Atlantic Ocean and back again in a sheltering embrace of North Carolina’s mainland coast and offshore sounds. For thousands of years these barrier islands, the Outer Banks, have survived onslaughts of wind and sea. Their long stretches of beach, marshes, sand dunes, and woodlands—today Cape Hatteras National Seashore—offer you solitude, discovery, wildness, and excitement.

Walk the beach and feel the ocean breezes, some gentle, others buffeting. Visit lighthouses—monuments to our encounters with the sea. Go surf fishing, beachcombing, swimming, snorkeling, sailing, and more. Learn about plants and wildlife, like the green sea turtle (*below*) and piping plover. Part land, part sea, diverse experiences await you at Cape Hatteras National Seashore.



NPS



Green sea turtle hatchling
NPS



Least tern chicks
NPS



Relaxing near Cape Hatteras Lighthouse
NPS / KURT MOSES



Seashells
NPS



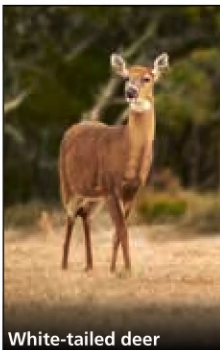
Family beach day
NPS / KURT MOSES



Hiking
NPS / KURT MOSES



Sunrise surf fishing
NPS / KURT MOSES



White-tailed deer
NPS / KURT MOSES

Where Land and Sea Merge

Cape Hatteras is at the ocean’s edge, but no well-defined boundary marks where sea ends and land begins. A dynamic relationship exists between land and sea. They share many valuable resources, but the sea rules the barrier islands—and few places escape its influence.

Near the sea, shore birds forage for food. Some catch small fish or crabs carried by the waves; others probe the sand or search under shells for clams, worms, or insects. Dwarfed, odd-shaped trees are severely pruned by salt-laden winds—another example of how the sea affects living things.

In the maritime forests, woodlands of oak, cedar, and yaupon holly grow in the

islands’ broader, higher, and somewhat protected areas. Red holly berries and vivid wildflowers enliven the otherwise green, brown, and blue landscape.

The landscape appears peaceful, but shifting sands, island migration, and sea level rise are slowly occurring, constantly changing the landscape. Sometimes storms batter the islands with fierce wind, waves, and storm surge, often resulting in rapid, drastic change.

For sea turtle hatchlings, survival is hard. Artificial lights, pollution, ghost crabs, birds, and fish are challenges they face. They survive to maturity only to return to the same beaches and face another challenge—laying a clutch of their own.

The ocean and sounds harbor a bounty of life, including red drum, blue crab, Spanish mackerel, shrimp, and clams. Wintering snow geese, ducks, Canada geese, and other bird species populate the islands—especially during fall and spring migrations and in the winter.

Salt marshes provide food sources for birds and other animals year-round. Here, the sound waters meet the marsh twice each day as tides come and go, exchanging and replenishing nutrients.

Each visit to Cape Hatteras National Seashore is always on the threshold of a new experience.

Graveyard of the Atlantic

Treacherous waters off the coast of the Outer Banks bear the name Graveyard of the Atlantic, a grim but fitting epithet. Over 600 ships wrecked here as victims of shallow sandbars, storms, and war. Diamond Shoals—a bank of shifting sand ridges hidden beneath a turbulent sea off Cape Hatteras—has never promised ships a safe passage, but seafarers often risked the shoals to take advantage of the north- or south-flowing currents passing nearby. Many never reached their destination.

Hurricanes and fierce winter nor’easters have driven many ships aground, like the schooner *G. A. Kohler* (*below*) in 1933. Other ships were lost in wars. In World War II, German submarines sank so many Allied tankers and cargo ships here that the waters earned a sobering nickname—Torpedo Junction.

In the past 400 years the graveyard has claimed many lives, but island villagers have saved many. As early as the 1870s, villagers served in the US Life Saving Service (*below*) and staffed lighthouses built to guide mariners. When rescue attempts failed, villagers buried the dead and salvaged shipwreck remains. Few ships wreck today, but storms still uncover the ruins of old wrecks that lie along the beaches of the Outer Banks.

In the 1800s, island rescue crews returned shipwreck survivors to safety in small oar-powered boats. Now, the US Coast Guard patrols the islands with helicopters and other modern craft.

The highest honor for saving a life during peacetime—the Gold Lifesaving Medal—has been awarded to many Hatteras rescuers for their heroic deeds.



G. A. Kohler was salvaged for iron during WWII.



SCHOONER—NPS; ABOVE—NATIONAL ARCHIVES; BACKGROUND—© KEVIN ADAMS

Exploring Cape Hatteras

Cape Hatteras National Seashore stretches north to south over 70 miles of beach. The Hatteras Inlet ferry and NC Hwy. 12, narrow but paved, link the islands. The highway goes through eight villages, rich in Outer Banks history, that predate the park. Stop at any park visitor center for information and activity schedules. For places to camp, fish, swim, and hike, see map below.



Bodie Island Not technically an island, Bodie features a lighthouse (*open for climbing seasonally*) built in 1872 with its original 1st-order Fresnel lens. View marsh waterbirds from a platform nearby. See the sportfishing catch of the day at Oregon Inlet Fishing Center when offshore boats return in late afternoon.

Hatteras Island Cape Hatteras Lighthouse (*open for climbing seasonally*), built in 1870, is the world's second-tallest brick lighthouse at 198½ feet. Nearby Buxton Woods Nature Trail winds through maritime woods. Multiple access areas to Pamlico Sound let you explore marshes and wetlands.

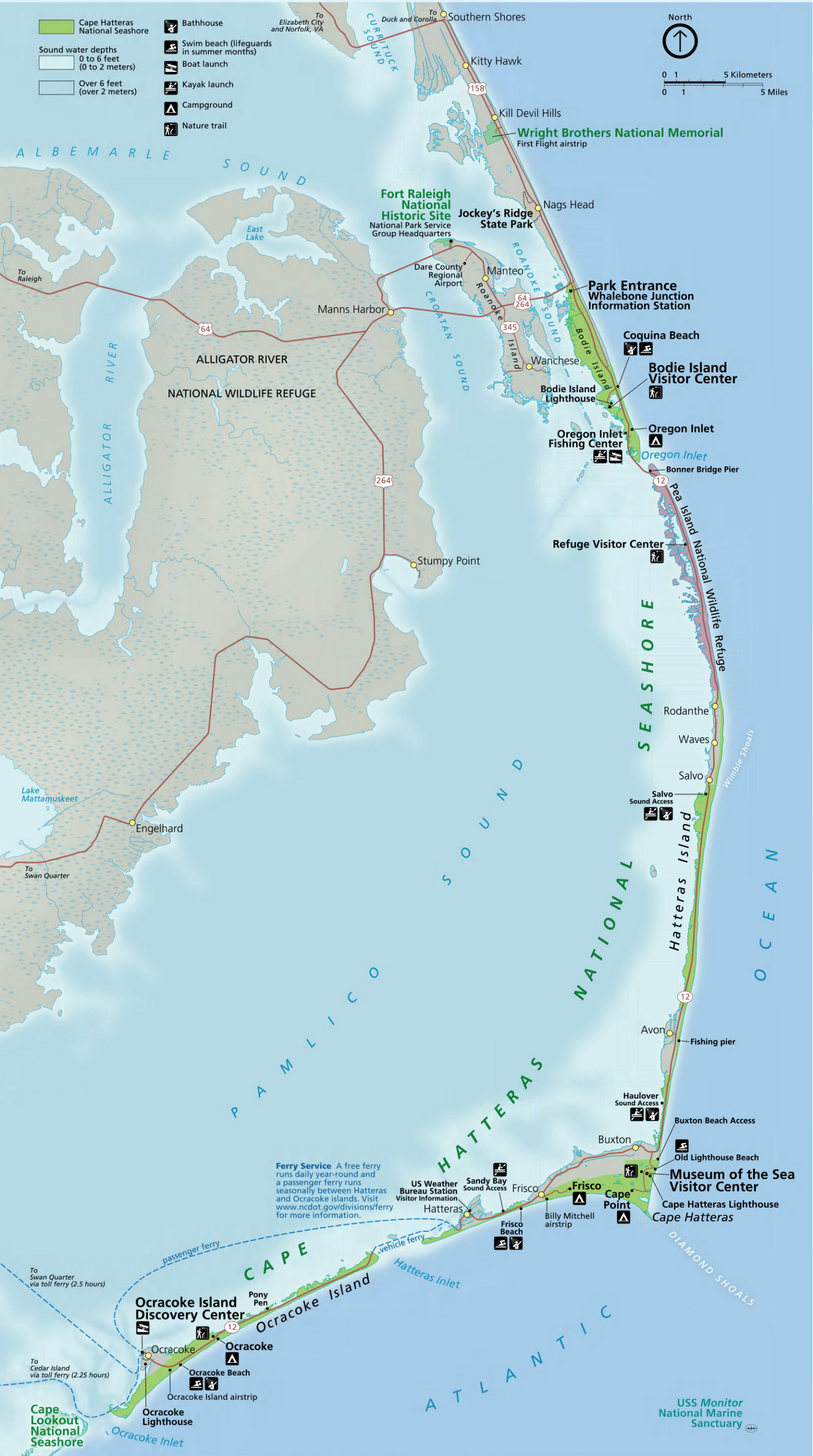
Ocracoke Island This isolated island and its small harbor village retain much of their early charm and character. Visit the Pony Pen to see descendants of a horse herd that once freely roamed the island. Ocracoke Lighthouse, built in 1823, is North Carolina's oldest operating

lighthouse (*open seasonally for viewing*). Because it is close to the Gulf Stream, this island offers excellent shelling opportunities.

Camping Camp only in designated areas. The four park campgrounds are Oregon Inlet and Ocracoke (open year-round) and Cape Point and Frisco (open seasonally; check the park website for opening and closing dates). Reserve sites (fee) at www.recreation.gov or 877-444-6777.

All campgrounds have drinking water, tables, fire grills, and restrooms. Oregon Inlet has 47 sites with electric and water hookups and warm-water showers (the other three have cold-water showers). Dumping stations are near Oregon Inlet, Ocracoke, and Cape Point.

Sand and wind conditions require longer than normal tent stakes. Shade awnings and insect netting will make camping more enjoyable.



Access To reach the park from the north, use US 158; from the west use US 64 and 264. Two mainland toll ferries serve Ocracoke: from Swan Quarter, NC, via US 264—2½ hours; from Cedar Island, NC, via US 70—2¼ hours. Reservations recommended: 800-BY-FERRY.

Safety Strong ocean currents can make swimming dangerous. *Rip currents can pull you straight out into the ocean. If caught in a rip current, call for help! Do not fight the current to return to shore. Instead, swim parallel to the shore until you are out of the current, then swim to shore.* Never swim alone or during thunderstorms. Swim at life-guarded beaches during summer months. Breaking waves at the shore's edge can throw you into the sand head-first, resulting in a broken neck or dislocated shoulder.

Every evening, remove umbrellas, canopies, and chairs, and fill in umbrellas/pits dug in the beach. This helps prevent injuries to nighttime beachgoers, including sea turtles. • Always use sunscreen. • Use repellent for mosquitoes and ticks; use netting for camping. • Protect feet from hot sand and spiny plants. In winter wear warm, wind-resistant clothing. Winds

and high humidity intensify the cold. • **Take all storms seriously, as NC Hwy. 12 may overwash.** Check weather forecasts and warnings daily. Heed official notices and evacuations. Hurricanes can occur June through November.

Regulations Pets must be on a six-foot leash and under your control at all times. Pets are prohibited on designated swim beaches and in wildlife closures and buildings. Do not leave pets unattended, and clean up after your pet. • Park your car in designated areas so it does not get stuck in soft sand. Bicyclists must use extreme caution; there are no established bike trails. • Permits required for off-road vehicle use are available at www.recreation.gov. • Permits required for beach fires are available online and at campgrounds and visitor centers. Fireworks and metal detectors are prohibited. • Use of unpiloted aircraft (drones) and unmanned watercraft (PWC) is prohibited. • For firearms regulations visit the park website. • Beach areas may close for wildlife protection or safety. Closures for nesting shorebirds and sea turtles may shrink or expand given wildlife behavior and protection requirements.

Emergencies call 911

Accessibility We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information, go to a visitor center, call, ask a ranger, or check the park website.

More Information
Cape Hatteras National Seashore
1401 National Park Dr.
Manteo, NC 27954
252-473-2111
www.nps.gov/caha

For text alerts, text NPSOBX to 333111. Follow us on social media. Use the NPS App to guide your visit.

Cape Hatteras National Seashore is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn more at www.nps.gov.



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