



Life on a Barrier Island

From the air Fire Island is fragile and isolated. Atlantic waves beat against a white beach; gnarled trees embrace barely visible homes; then it's gone, and Great South Bay dominates the image. Over the centuries devastating storms off the Atlantic Ocean have battered dunes, opened inlets, and threatened to destroy Fire Island. Yet this barrier island is resilient; beaches eroded by winter storms are replenished by the return of sand from off-shore sandbars, and beach grasses establish a foothold once again on slowly developing primary dunes. Wildlife abounds on the island. Deer roam freely and find shelter in thickets; toads, cranberries, and cattails live in freshwater areas between ocean and bay; and migrating ducks and geese seek refuge in marshes. For visitors and residents of the diverse communities, this island so near urban New York is a place of excitement and solitude. Fire Island National Seashore was established in 1964 to preserve the only developed barrier island in the United States without roads. In 1980 Congress designated 1,400 acres including a 7-mile stretch of island as a national wilderness area.



Looking east toward Kismet and Saltaire from the 1858 Fire Island Lighthouse. The Atlantic Ocean and the old Coast Guard Annex building are on the right, and Great South Bay is on the left. The beacon flashes every 7.5 seconds and can be seen 24 miles away.

All Photos © Frank Davis



Sandy soils on the north side of the primary dune cannot hold rain. Only the hardiest of plants, such as beach plum and beach grass, can survive here.

Fire Island—the genesis of its name sparks our imagination. The island may have been named after Fire Island Inlet, which appeared on a deed in 1789, and the inlet's name may have started as a simple spelling error. The number of inlet islands has varied over time, and it is likely that "five" or the Dutch word "vier," meaning four, was misspelled on early maps as "fire." Fire Island Beach appeared on charts in the 1850s, and folklore suggests the name arose from land-based pirates, or "wreckers," who built beach fires at night to lure cargo ships onto shore. Some say poison ivy gave Fire Island its name, either for its red leaves in autumn or its fiery itch. The origin of its name may be obscure, but Fire Island's role in maritime history is well known. The island's wealth of seafood, waterfowl, and plants attracted American Indians and, later, European settlers. The Fire Island Lighthouse guided ships safely past sandbars. Surfmen of the U.S. Lifesaving Service, housed in stations along the beach, rescued shipwreck survivors.



The estate of William Floyd, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, traces the Floyd family from the early 1700s to 1976. The land evolved from wilderness to estate to summer retreat to small game preserve to a national park area. The home contrasts the old with the new and reflects 200 years of change.

Dunes and Forest

Dunes are formed when ocean winds carry sand inland until an obstacle such as beach grass interrupts the wind's velocity, and the sand is dropped. The grasses respond by spreading their roots and sending up shoots. Birds and animals attracted by the grasses deposit new seeds, and a variety of vegetation begins. Behind these growing barricades, shrubs take hold and build soil. They are replaced by thickets and eventually holly and hardwood forests. So the cycle continues. Without the anchoring roots of beach grasses there would be no dunes; without sheltering dunes there would be no forests; and without this precious balance, there would be no island.

Ocean and Beach

Fire Island is on the move. Every day more than 10,000 waves pound its beach, shoveling sand into currents that carry 500,000 cubic yards westward each year. The bulk is transported in winter and during storms, but an equivalent daily rate would find about 25,000 persons hauling little red-wagon loads of sand to Democrat Point. A witness to this migration is the Fire Island Lighthouse. Built in 1858 at the island's western end, it is now nearly 5 miles east of Democrat Point. Plants and wildlife move with the island, but humans who have built homes and summer memories are not finding it easy to let nature take its course.

Marshes and Bay

Along with its western migration caused by long-shore currents, Fire Island is slowly moving north toward Long Island. In a sense the island is rolling over on itself as sand from the oceanside is gathered by wind and waves, blown or washed across the island or moved by currents and tides through inlets, and deposited on the bayside. Marsh grasses colonize the deposits and produce organic debris that combines with the sand. The resulting marshes and their nutrient-rich muck are among the most productive areas on Earth.

At Watch Hill children learn how different environments create the barrier island ecosystem.

Exploring Fire Island

