

Gulf Islands

National Seashore
Mississippi/Florida

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Relaxation and recreation. Whether you're spending an afternoon on the beach or a vacation at one of the campgrounds, these are the gifts offered to you by Gulf Islands National Seashore. Clear blue waters, gentle sloping beaches, coastal marshes, and human history present a backdrop for taking life easy. Here in the northeastern Gulf of Mexico, Congress has set aside a few of the barrier islands for recreation and for their natural and historical resources. The park stretches from West Ship Island in Mississippi 240 kilometers (150 miles) east to the far end of Santa Rosa Island in Florida. None of the park is located in the finger of Alabama that juts between the other two states.

Islands alone do not constitute the national seashore. A few areas on the mainland have also been included. Here you can find old forts; an experimental tree farm begun by John Quincy Adams; archeological traces of the earliest inhabitants; and the plants and wildlife of the estuaries, those arms of the sea where salt-water and freshwater mix.

The barrier islands, however, are the glue that holds this mosaic of land and water together. The source of the brilliant white sand is rock material from the upland areas to the north. Over milleniums, streams and rivers moved the weathered remains of these rocks down to the sea. There are several theories as to how the islands were formed from this sand. All theories involve wave and wind action and fluctuating sea levels shaping the barrier islands that lie parallel to the gulf coast.

These islands are ever-changing, moving constantly to the west. Littoral currents wear away the eastern ends and build up the western ends. Violent storms cause overwash that rearranges large amounts of sand. Constant winds, on a smaller scale, shift and build dunes. Change by the winds is slowed only by the protective covering of grasses and other vegetation growing on the dune line nearest the gulf. The elaborate stem and root system of the sea oat, in particular, is vital to the protection and stabilization of barrier islands. So important in fact, that the picking or

disturbing of sea oats and other vegetation is strictly prohibited. Barrier islands are just that, "barriers." They effectively reduce the destructive force of violent storms before reaching the mainland. They provide quiet waters behind them for valuable marine life, and their long stretches of beach invite you to swim, walk, surf-fish, and just relax.

Historic sites are protected on the barrier islands and nearby. Today kitchen middens—trash piles of seashells—, ruins of early forts, and concrete gun batteries give us an opportunity to trace man's history in the area. Europeans first arrived on these shores in the early 1500s. In their diaries and records they reported finding a rich native American culture. Today archeologists continue to make discoveries that add to the story of the Indians' early way of life. Naval Live Oaks in Florida, once the site of several Indian villages, has been the focus of many investigations.

Discovery of this part of the New World was followed by a

struggle between colonial powers for its control. Both Spain, in the mid-1500s, and France, about 1700, attempted to establish settlements in present-day Mississippi. The rivalry came to a peak in the early 1800s when the young United States cast covetous eyes on this territory. By 1821 the United States had acquired the last of West Florida and the colonial era ended.

The next year the United States began plans to develop Pensacola into a major naval base by fortifying the harbor entrance. The only action the forts saw came during the Civil War. Prisoners of war also were held here during that time. In the last years of the 19th century, fortifications continued to be built along the coast. They were manned up to the end of World War II, when they became obsolete.

This then is Gulf Islands, a park rich in cultural and natural history opportunities. Whatever you do or however long you stay, we hope that you enjoy your visit.



SCUBA divers return from a foray into the watery world of the gulf islands. With proper equipment and training, such a journey can lead to many unexpected, yet pleasant and satisfying experiences.



A shrimp boat heads out to reap a rich harvest. Shrimp are hatched in the open gulf, but by the time they are juveniles they have reached the estuaries inside the barrier islands. In this nutrient-rich environment they grow to be adults before returning to the open sea.



Without vegetation to hold the sand in place the wind would blow the dunes away in short order. Dunes vegetation masks a toughness that manifests itself in a root system that can often extend 6 meters (20 feet) below the surface. Here, sea oats sway in the breeze.



A park naturalist guides a boatload of people through the waterways at the Davis Bayou unit in Mississippi. Such trips give people a chance to see a large part of an estuarine system in a way that would not normally be possible. Check with the park staff about the tours.

The Life of the Barrier Island

Barrier islands are special places. They appear permanent and static but in fact are continually changing, moving parallel to the mainland and toward or away from it. They buffer the mainland from storms, but storms may cause a particular island to disappear or split in two. Or

storms may push a dune line clear across an island as Hurricane Frederic did in 1979 on parts of Santa Rosa Island.

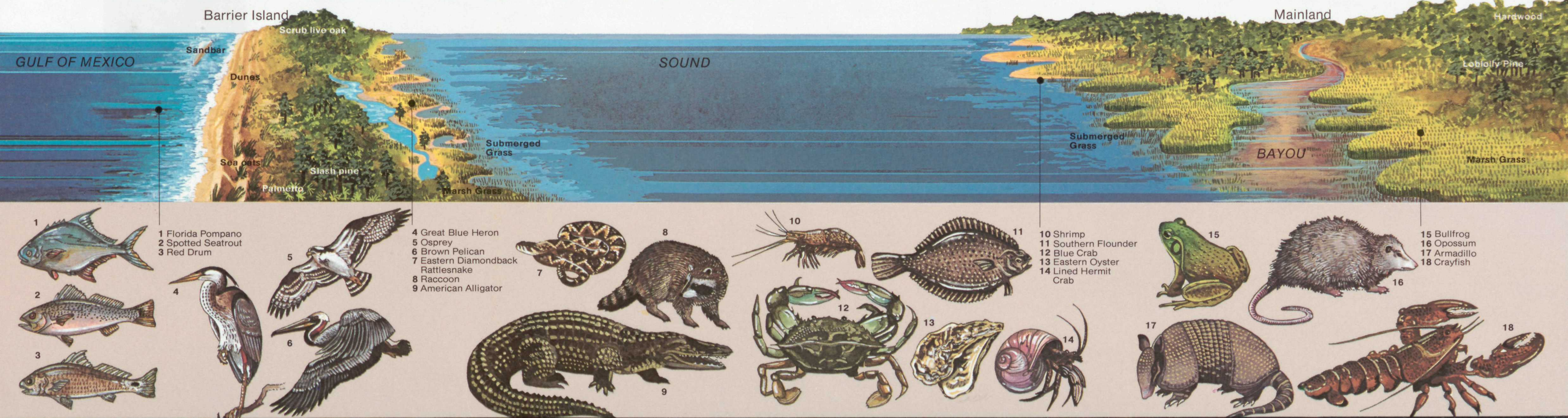
Despite all these transitory qualities, life grabs hold on these islands as if it meant to hang on

forever. Salt is one of several factors determining the kind and abundance of plant life. Near the gulf, plants, such as the sea oats, which are tolerant of high salt levels can grow. Behind the primary dune, shrubs and some trees can be found, but they never grow much higher than

the dunes that protect them from the salt spray. Farther back, freshwater collects in marshes among old dunes and supplies trees with water. Animal life on these barrier islands, too, is limited by the plant life, which provides food and protection. This is a special little world

extraordinarily affected by the whims of nature. Behind barrier islands the waters of the sound and bayou are less salty. And nutrients washed down from the mainland support a rich marine life. Here shrimp and fishes valuable to commercial fishermen move through many of their

life cycles. Protection is the key word. The barrier islands give shelter to rich plant and animal communities on the islands, in the sound and bayou, and on the mainland itself.



Gulf Islands

Regulations and Safety Tips

Do not swim alone in unguarded waters. Be extra cautious about rip currents, jellyfish, Portuguese man-of-war, and barnacle-covered rocks. Boaters should be familiar with "Rules of the Road." Be alert for sudden storms. During thun-

derstorms, do not remain in the open on piers, beaches, or fortifications. Notify a ranger promptly of any boating or diving accident.

Watch your step while exploring the forts and batteries. It is wise to

take a flashlight, since passageways are dimly lit. Some fortifications are closed for safety; please observe all barriers and signs. No glass containers are permitted on the Mississippi islands, and all trash must be removed as you leave. All plants,

animals, and historic objects in the park are protected by law. Motor vehicles must remain on roads. Metal detectors are prohibited. Bird nesting areas may be posted as closed to all entry during the nesting season. Keep pets on leashes;

they are not allowed on beaches, on tour boats, or in buildings. Do not feed or disturb wildlife. Gulf Islands National Seashore is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.



Visiting the Mississippi Section

Getting There To reach Davis Bayou on the mainland in Ocean Springs, follow the signs for the park along U.S. 90. The islands in the Mississippi section are about 16 kilometers (10 miles) offshore and can be reached only by boat. Concession boat trips to West Ship Island from Gulfport and Biloxi are offered: from April to mid-May, once a day (twice daily on weekends); from mid-May to Labor Day, twice daily; and from Labor Day to October, twice daily only on weekends. There are no trips from October to April. Private boats may dock near Fort Massachusetts on West Ship Island in the daytime all year. A boat shuttle service to Horn Island is available for backpackers. For more information check at the William M. Colmer Visitor Center.

Camping and other Facilities Davis Bayou has many year-round facilities, including a campground with 51 sites, electric and water hookups, and a sewage dump station. The area also has a group tent area, picnic shelters, ballfield, self-guiding nature trail, and boat dock with ramps. The William M. Colmer Visitor Center has sales publications, exhibits, and other information, plus an auditorium.

The islands offer a more limited range of facilities. Primitive camping is permitted in all locations on East Ship, Horn, and Petit Bois Islands. Only Horn Island has drinking water; it is available near the ranger station. Limited food service is offered on tour boats and on West Ship Island. Guided tours of Fort Massachusetts on West Ship Island are given in the

summer. Exhibits, sales publications, and information are available at the fort.

Swimming There is no sandy beach at Davis Bayou on the mainland. On West Ship Island, the swim beach has a bathhouse and lifeguards in the summer. Lifeguards are not provided on East Ship, Horn, or Petit Bois Islands. Be careful of treacherous currents.

Fishing and Boating No license is required for saltwater fishing. Fish anywhere but stay away from swimmers. Boaters should use NOAA charts 11372 and 11374.

For more information write: Assistant Superintendent, 3500 Park Rd., Ocean Springs MS 39564.

Visiting the Florida Section

Getting There To reach the historic mainland forts and the Naval Aviation Museum, use the main entrance of Pensacola Naval Air Station about 1.5 kilometers (1 mile) south of Barrancas Avenue, Fla. 292, on Navy Boulevard, Fla. 295. Florida 292 leads southwest from Pensacola to Perdido Key. On the island, bear left at the first fork in the road. To get to the Naval Live Oaks, Fort Pickens, and Santa Rosa Areas, take U.S. 98 east from Pensacola across Pensacola Bay to Gulf Breeze. The Naval Live Oaks Area is just east of Gulf Breeze on U.S. 98. For Fort Pickens and Santa Rosa, take Fla. 399 from Gulf Breeze to Pensacola Beach. From there, Fort Pickens is 14.5 kilometers (9 miles) west, while the Santa Rosa Area's facilities are 16 kilometers (10 miles) east. Okaloosa is on U.S. 98, east of Fort Walton Beach.

Camping and other Facilities Near Fort Pickens, which is open daily throughout the year, is a 189-site campground, with electricity at many camp sites. Food and other supplies, and laundry facilities, are at the campground store. You can also see marine life aquariums, shell and nature exhibits, and historic artifacts. Two picnic areas are also available at Fort Pickens with other picnic areas at Santa Rosa and Okaloosa. There is a snack bar at Santa Rosa.

Swimming and SCUBA Diving Lifeguards are on duty in season at Johnson Beach on Perdido Key, at the Santa Rosa Area, and at the Fort Pickens Area. Santa Rosa has a bathhouse and Fort Pickens and Perdido Key have outdoor showers. Rangers at Fort Pickens can recommend good SCUBA diving. Do not spearfish

around jetties, piers, or where people are swimming. Do not swim in the entrance channel to Pensacola Bay.

Fishing and Boating You can charter a boat or try your luck fishing anywhere along the beach where no one is swimming. No license is required in saltwater. A launching ramp for small boats is at Okaloosa. Use NOAA chart 11378.

Hiking You can follow self-guiding trails at Naval Live Oaks, Johnson Beach, Fort Barrancas, and in the Fort Pickens area; or you can travel with groups led by park rangers. Or you may simply want to join the beachcombers.

For further information write: Superintendent, P.O. Box 100, Gulf Breeze, FL 32561-0100.

West Ship Island (Miss.)



Davis Bayou (Miss.)



Fort Pickens, Historic Forts, and Naval Live Oaks (Fla.)

