

RECREATION / COVER STORY

You'll be surprised at how much the coast of North Carolina has to offer in the wintertime.

A cold and daring move

They may laugh at first. Go to the beach? In the dead of winter? Your visiting holiday kin will protest in that tone usually reserved for one of Uncle Harvey's tales from *The Big One*. The water's gotta be freezing, half the stores are closed and Professor Hacker's *Last Treasure Golf and Raceway* with the mine train and bumper boats probably isn't even open.

They'll think you're daft — or that you've been hitting the eggnog. Worse, they may see through your little scheme to get them out of the house for the day.

But when they return — eventually — their skepticism will be drowned out by late upon late of the wonders of the winter beach.

■ ■ ■
The difference between the summer beach and the winter beach is like night and day — which is a good place to start. In

the summer, a good 15 of every 24 hours is drenched in sunlight. The sun, directly overhead, is hard to escape, its heat merciless, its presence draining. How else to explain our prime summer beach objective: lying in a beach chair and, if we have the energy, reading.

In winter, you get eight hours, tops. And not prime-time, height-of-the-sky sun, either. Rather, it rises late, spends its day traversing the southern half of the sky, then retires without even putting in a full workday. You're grateful for its brief appearance and find its presence invigorating.

There are more obvious differences, as well. No people, for one. A week ago, on a pristine morning with no breeze, temperature already into the 50s by 8 a.m. and the night's shell deposit waiting to be harvested, there were four people as far as the eye could see up and down Atlantic Beach.

■ ■ ■
That leads to another reason for a winter beach trip, from a marine



Among the attractions of a winter trip to the coast are the wild horses on Shackleford Banks and the ducks atarkers Island.

scientist who has studied the coast for years, even written an ecological guide to it.

"The motels are cheap," says Dirk Frankenberg, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of *The Nature of North Carolina's Southern Coast: Barrier Islands, Coastal Waters, and Wetlands*. "Affordable accommodations isn't the only reason Frankenberg likes the coast this time of year. "The bird-watching — and, if you insist, the bird hunting — are very good," Frankenberg says of the area, which is situated along the Atlantic flyway and is winter home to a bevy of migrating birds.



■ ■ ■
"It's the best place on the East Coast to view a wide variety of oceanic birds, coastal birds and flyway birds."

Early winter is likewise a good time for fishing, he says, particularly for surf species like striped bass that migrate up and down the coast. A little longer into the season, in January and February, he says the overwintering bluefin tuna should be biting off Cape Hatteras.

For those with a little more patience and time, Frankenberg says it's a good time to watch the forces of erosion at work. "Sand moves more vigorously because there are more storms offshore churning it up."

And there's one practical advantage to a winter trip not to be overlooked: the absence of chiggers, ticks, mosquitoes and other blood sucking critters that can make a summertime trip into the coastal wild miserable. "After the first frost, they're pretty much gone."

There's plenty to recommend a winter trip to the coast, Frankenberg says, and plenty of places to enjoy it.

■ ■ ■
In the Morehead City/Atlantic Beach area there are at least eight natural attractions of more than fill the dance card of your day tripping holiday visitors.

For the adventurous, there are several hikes, hikes better suited to this time of year, as a warning posted at the trailhead of Patsy Pond Nature Trail in Croatan National Forest suggests: "This area is home to poisonous snakes and biting insects."

With the cold-blooded snakes lulled into a winter stupor and insects on hiatus, venture forth and you'll find a surprising cross-



Carl Bundy and Diane Stenson enjoy the winter solitude of Cape Lookout.

section of coastal ecology says Ted Wilgis, education director with the North Carolina Coastal Federation, a nonprofit group that conducts a variety of educational programs in the region. "There's a longleaf pine forest, a pocomiss wetland (essentially a swamp on a hill and the red-cockaded woodpecker," Wilgis says of the reserve's attributes.

The hike, less than two miles, is enhanced by a brochure available at the trailhead that points out flora, fauna and natural occurrences along the way.

Down the road a bit, the 1.3-mile Cedar Point Tideland Trail offers an eye-popping lesson in ecological succession. The area bore the brunt of hurricanes Bertha and Fran in 1996, and its effects are still evident. A signboard near the trailhead notes that this area once



From a maritime forest you can view Bogue Sound on the Alice G. Hoffman nature trail.

supported a healthy forest of 100-foot loblolly pines; look out now and you'll see a jumble of downed lumber, punctuated occasionally by a 15-foot, bark-stripped stump. Crowding the former understorey you'll find a tangle of green — wax myrtle, redbay, holly, fetterbush and various weeds and grasses — battling for supremacy.

Venture out on the barrier island that's home to mile after mile of condos and beach houses, from Emerald Isle to Atlantic Beach, and you'll find the occasional oasis. The Alice G. Hoffman Trail within the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores and the adjoining Roosevelt Nature Trail both provide a good introduction to the curious world of maritime forests.

The truly adventurous are

rewarded by trips out to Shackleford Banks and Carrot Island, home of the Rachel Carson National Estuarine Reserve. Both are accessible only by ferry or water taxi. Shackleford is an eight-mile-long barrier island that gritty homesteaders once tried to tame. The primary legacy of their efforts: a herd of about 260 horses that now roam the island, from its maritime forest to its freshwater marsh to its long stretches of beach.

While Shackleford is about a 20-minute boat trip from

Beaufort, it takes maybe three minutes to cross Taylor Creek and reach Carrot Island. Smaller in size, it boasts many of the same features as Shackleford, down to the wild horses. It has the advantage, though, of an interpretive trail, developed by the North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Pick up a map of this self-guided trail at the reserve's office on nearby Radio Island and you'll be able to identify much of the island's plant life, as well as its more popular birds and sea life. Check the tide tables before you go, the reserve's Doug Coker says. Carrot Island is best visited during the period two hours before to two hours after low tide.

RESOURCES

Some helpful guides to understanding coastal ecology:

■ **The Nature of North Carolina's Southern Coast: Barrier Islands, Coastal Waters, and Wetlands**, by Dirk Frankenberg (University of North Carolina Press). A highly readable guide that gives a comprehensive ecological account of the coast from Portsmouth Island to Calabash.

■ **Southeastern and Caribbean Seashores: A Peterson Field Guide**, by Eugene H. Kaplan (Houghton Mifflin, \$18). A 425-page guidebook of seashore environments with the Peterson dedication to thoroughness and detail.

■ **A Guide to Ocean Dune Plants Common to North Carolina**, by E. Jean Wilson Kraus (UNC Press, \$8.95). A handy guide with concise descriptions and drawings.

A cool Web site:
■ **Learn North Carolina**, www.learnnc.org. Part of The North Carolina Teachers' Network, this site includes a new segment on Virtual Field Trips throughout the state, put together by UNC's Dirk Frankenberg. Of particular interest to coastal explorers is the tour of the outer coastal plan.

For information on lodging and other activities in the Beaufort/Atlantic Beach area, contact:

■ **Caratter County Chamber of Commerce**, (252) 726-6831 or (800) 758-6982.
And for more information on natural sites and education centers in North Carolina, contact:

■ **Environmental Education Centers in North Carolina**, a non-profit organization that promotes environmental facilities with an educational focus, 733-0711, http://www.enr.state.nc.us/ENR/enr/centr/eec/ectc.htm ■



Visit the keeper's quarters, the Cape Lookout lighthouse or explore the 55 miles of shoreline on the Core Banks.

STAFF PHOTOS BY CHRIS SEWARD

CONTINUED ON PAGE 19