

## A Winter Day On Bird Island



**R**each into the Kindred Spirit mailbox. Glance through any of the slightly soggy notebooks there, and you'll know you couldn't be anywhere but Bird Island.

Something about this place inspires folks to wax eloquent. They write in the journals about solitude, peace, deep inner feelings. Their contributions include poems, prayers, random musings, and the forthright scrawl of children inspired to Robinson Crusoe fantasies by their first trip to a deserted island.

A makeshift altar has been constructed on the beach, with a cross fashioned from pieces of a foam dock pontoon held together by a stray length of nylon rope. A washed-up boat seat serves as a kneeling pad.

We've waited for two months to take our trip, for the convergent necessities of a full-moon tide and a balmy day. Our tour guide pilots his small boat through the maze of marsh grass and inches-deep water so familiar to him and points out the tracks left by deer and mink who take advantage of low tide to do a little island-hopping. He glides up close to the Stanalands' goats, grazing on a little spoil island along the way.

On the beach and in the marsh of Bird Island, sandpipers and gulls gather by the thousands. This mid-February, the birds think it's already spring, preening and exhibiting the behavior that earned them a place in the phrase "birds and the bees." The warm, wet winter has skewed the normally predictable migration patterns of lots of waterbirds. Species which normally pass through, stayed. Ones who normally check in didn't.

There's little sign of human disrespect or mischief, except for a few stray aluminum soda cans and a mound of small rocks swiped from the Little River Inlet jetties which jut from the island's southeast corner. The only other signs of human industry are the old mostly washed-out sand causeway and railway bed and a line of power poles to nowhere.

There's no classic maritime forest here, only myrtle

and cedar shrub thicket. The handful of remaining pines are mostly dead, victims of saltwater overwash during Hurricane Hugo.

The island is tiny, its nearly 150 acres made up of one-third salt marsh and one-fifth freshwater wetlands. It straddles the state line, approachable from Little River Inlet on one side or Mad Inlet from the other. Folks walk across Mad Inlet at low tide and sometimes get stranded by the incoming tide.

It's a party scene in the summertime, with hundreds of boats pulled up on the beach while their occupants sunbathe and picnic. Posters tacked to clubhouse bulletin boards on the mainland advertise organized jaunts to Bird Island and display old newspaper clippings about the elusive Kindred Spirit, keeper of the mailbox.

Our tour guide has his own version of the Kindred Spirit legend, adding with a chuckle that keeping a little mystery about it is part of the fun. He says he'll gather up the journals and mail them to the Spirit, described as a lady in a distant part of the county who's thinking about publishing choice entries from the 50 or so books she has accumulated over a decade.

This is neither the first Kindred Spirit mailbox, nor the first Brunswick island to have one. "It started between Ocean Isle and Sunset Beach about 13 or 14 years ago," our guide explains. "The little island where it was kind of washed away. They come and go, you know."

In winter, the journal entries grow fewer, farther between and more reverent. They reflect and extoll the bittersweet loneliness of the coastal winter on a spit of sand and scrub where there are no motor sounds, no voices, no hammers and saws. And the mixed promise of the coming season, when we'll once again be barefoot but no longer among the fortunate few.

Photos By Eric Carlson  
Text By Lynn Carlson



**CLOCKWISE, from top:** Bird Island visitors share their thoughts in the journals of the Kindred Spirit's mailbox; one takes a moment to share some thoughts; our tour guide, Frank Nesmith, points out the marvels of the marsh from his small boat; goats graze on a spoil island nearby; a makeshift island fashioned from flotsam provides a spiritual sanctuary for visitors.

