

## Shoulder Season

Visitors, Residents Take Time To Bask In The Calm Before The Annual Storm

**BY LYNN CARLSON**  
Absolute perfection. That's what the lucky few find who wrangle a day off work or throw household chores to the wind and enjoy the beautiful springtime beach at its most delightful. Mid-week, that is. Pre-Memorial Day.

The sky is azure, there's a gentle breeze blowing, and there's no haze on the distant horizon. You can lie in the sun without sweating and go for a swim without shivering.

The strandside population on these days lacks all the middle age categories. The children are pre-schoolers and the grownups, mostly post-retirement. (Those few twenty- and thirtysomethings hanging around squint furtively at the camera as if they're afraid of being photographed somewhere they're not supposed to be...)

The pace is slow; there's mostly just reading, sleeping, wading and sandcastle-building going on. Listen... there's not a boombox in earshot, no Frisbee games, no stunt kites, and no banner planes. And look... there's not a piece of litter as far as the eye can see.

A quintet of attractive, silver-haired women chais under an umbrella, now and then tossing pretzels to a formation of gulls standing at the ready. Couples far



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON  
**DEVIN GORE, 4, of Whiteville, and Sarah Catherine Leggett, 2, of Leland, make friends as they enjoy their first ocean swim of the season together.**

past bikini age stroll hand in hand. Toddlers splash in the water's edge. Babies doze under

umbrellas. A lone surfer bobs past the breakers, happy to be there despite the obvious absence of a swell.

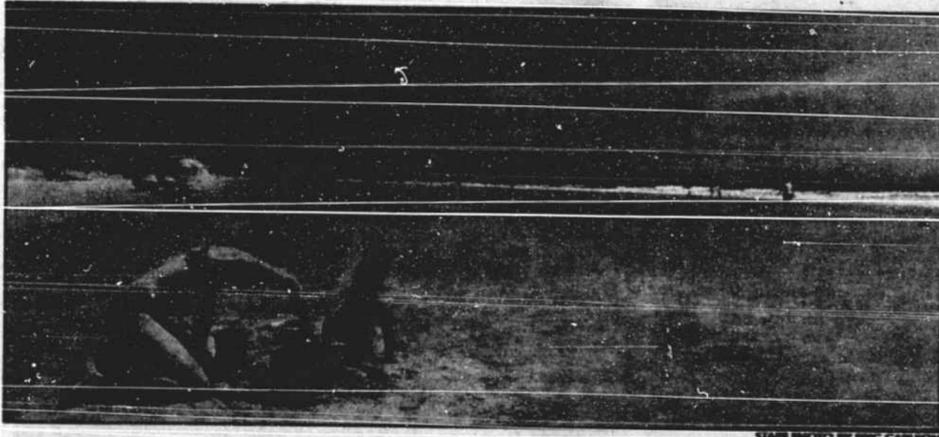
The children revel in newfound freedom for toes which have been confined to shoes and haven't had sand between them for much too long a time. Boys and girls run and fling themselves in the water's edge as if overcome by the moment. Their moms look contented, as they remind themselves that these special days turn the cliché "quality time" into something real and worth savoring.

It isn't time yet for the Midwesterners and Northeasterners who will stream down in minivans after school lets out to celebrate the family's annual Southern summer fling. Strike up a conversation with a stranger here and you'll probably find he's from Whiteville or she's from Leland—close enough by for a midweek day trip. They love it in spring, but won't take the trouble in mid-summer when the mercury rises, the parking spaces get scarce and the traffic grows bothersome.

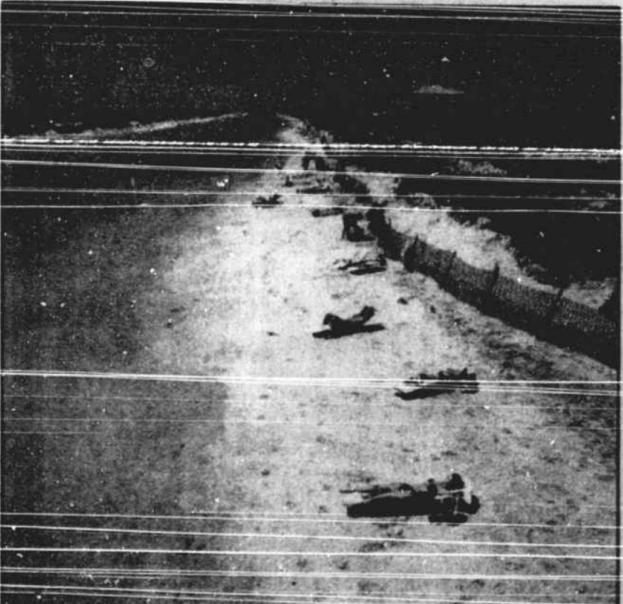
But for now, for this 80-degree moment on this spring day, it's all perfection—the sea-green sea, the sky-blue sky, the sugary sand. A thing so rare deserves to be treasured. And is...



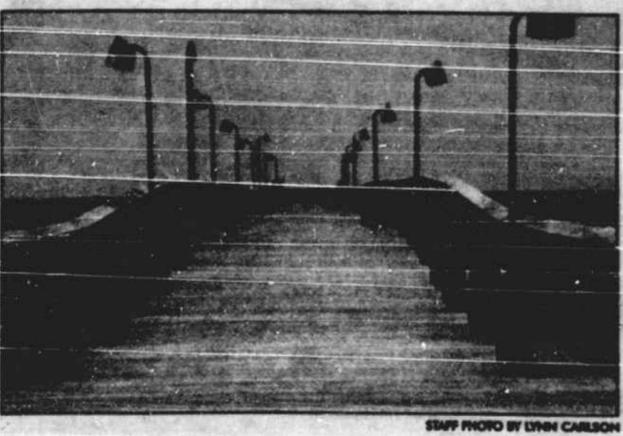
STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON  
**THIS TODDLER, identified by his companions only as "C.J. from Holden Beach," finds that even though you can't walk a walker in wet sand, it's still a nice vantage point for watching the world go by. He was enjoying the beautiful day from his post beside the Ocean Isle Beach Fishing Pier.**



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON  
**TIFFNEY COX, 14, of Calabash and her cousin Koaie Dionion, 3, also of Calabash, enjoy sandcastle building with plenty of room to expand as much as their imaginations will allow.**



STAFF PHOTO BY LYNN CARLSON  
**IN PHOTO ABOVE, a few sunbathers enjoy the quiet beach at mid-day. Below, the pier is nearly deserted on a workday before the weekend onslaught of eager anglers.**



STAFF PHOTO BY LYNN CARLSON

## One of Our Finest Herons

BY BILL FAVER

Often we see Green-backed Herons perched precariously on a low shrub watching the water for small fish. They can remain almost motionless until something to their liking swims into range, and then a quick jab with their long bill catches the food.

These birds are small for herons, about 18-22 inches long, and have an overall brownish appearance, with more of a slate-blue than green back. When startled

they can raise a crest on the top of their heads and extend their necks far out, making them look rather strange and different from their normal perched position. Green-backed Herons have reddish-brown necks, sharp pointed bills and orange legs.

Sometimes this heron can be quite acrobatic. They may lean down watching for minnows until they are in a position where the head is way below where their feet hold onto a branch. They can even drop off into the water at just the right time, and some observers have reported them swimming underwater in pursuit of a fish.

"Grecaies" nest in single pairs away from the rookeries of many of the other herons. Nests are made of sticks and can be placed anywhere from on the ground, in low-growing shrubs, or up to 30 feet high in the trees. Eggs are pale blue to greenish and 3 to 6 eggs are incubated for about 24 days by both the male and female. Young leave the nest after about 5 weeks. Preferred nesting sites seem to be around ponds, lakes and streams, though they have been found nesting in dry locations like old orchards and upland woods.

Watch for these exciting herons in swamps and wetlands. You may see them perched patiently waiting for some action in the water below them, or you may see them flying slowly overhead just after sunset. Don't try to see the "green-back," just look for a dark, crow-sized bird quietly sharing space around us as we enjoy together this special place where land and sky and sea come together.



PHOTO BY BILL FAVER  
**THE GREEN-BACKED HERON is a small, crow-sized, dark-colored heron.**