



By Richard Seale

A good time for Pocosin waterfowl

North Carolina's 2021 big game hunting seasons will be over as you read this article. I fulfilled my 80th year hoped-for hunting goals, and I am grateful for many aspects of that. Unfortunately, COVID's impact on 2021 made it a not-so-great year for humanity on Planet Earth. I felt an unusual sense of relief and hope when typing "2022" in the header. May all these 2s bring us a reset to what not long ago was normal health and communal life, with perhaps real increases in social tranquility and true peace on earth and universally mutual good will.

Sometimes, good "hunting" happens with a camera, binoculars or a scope. As I have written previously, Linda and I find waterfowl birding trips to Pocosin Wildlife Reserve's Pungo and Mattamuskeet lakes in Hyde County wonderful day trips in the months of December, January and February. We got to Mattamuskeet at the end of November and were greeted with large populations of tundra swans, Canada geese, and large flocks of quite a few species of ducks, including green-winged and blue-winged teal, pintails, widgeon and mallards. We watched a mature bald eagle swoop down and grab a duck. With all these birds gathered together, a special treat is the variety of sounds they make. Mattamuskeet is set up as a drive-through, more than a walking park. To enjoy all the sounds, it is important to remember to stop the car and open your windows, no matter how cold out it is. The treasure of sounds includes splashing take offs and landings on the water, the rush of wings as flocks fly overhead and each species' vocal contributions to a vibrant and wonderful cacophony.

It is a 141-mile, three-hour drive from Morehead City to Mattamuskeet via Highway 70 to New Bern, 17 to Washington, then 264 East to Mattamuskeet where 94 goes north across the lake on a paved causeway. The best birding is right along the reserve's Mattamuskeet Road, which is the main entrance. That road leads to the old pumping station "light house" and the reserve ranger office. A museum and rest rooms are at the office. With COVID problems, the office has sometimes been closed. During duck hunting seasons the reserve rents out blinds along Wildlife Drive, the dirt lane across the small bridge from the office. On hunting days during morning hours, that drive is closed till mid-morning.

We normally take a lunch and water with us since Mattamuskeet is pretty well in the middle of nowhere. There are a few food sources in Fairfield, and filling up your gas tank in Washington is a good idea. Our normal route back from the reserve is to get back on 94 at the reserve exit and cross the lake on the causeway to Fairfield, with a stop at the observation deck. In Fairfield we turn left (west) and run along the lake edge on Piney Woods Road to Turnpike Road, a right turn, which goes past the Hyde County prison and returns to 264 near Swan Quarter, a left turn at the blinker light, and Rose Bay, a right turn at the blinker. We often buy oysters or shrimp at the Swan Quarter fishing docks. Maggie at Hobo Seafood is our first choice. On the way back to Belhaven, you go over the Intracoastal Waterway at Ponzer and a few miles later in "downtown" Ponzer (don't expect to see more than a volunteer fire department building, a new gas station and a church or two), you come to 45, which is the road to the Pungo Lake portion of Pocosin Lakes Reserve. It's about 10 miles to the entrance of this reserve. While Mattamuskeet is mostly a paved road trip, Pungo Lake is an all-dirt road experience. As 45 makes a 90-degree turn left, on your right



Eagles on the BS McNeill Osprey Platform near McNeill Park in Pine Knoll Shores in December 2021.—Photo by Richard Seale

is a sign board with reserve maps and information. Going straight is Pat's Road, which is a paved road at the edge of the reserve. Pat's Road paving ends within a mile, and there the reserve's dirt road network starts.

Usually swans and geese are flying overhead or feeding in fields. Flooded impoundments on the right side start at the end of the fields. In the middle of some woods there is a right turn onto a sometimes very muddy road. It sometimes has a sign that says West Lake Road. After about two hundred yards or so, this lane makes a 90-degree right turn. At the end of this section of road, a flooded impoundment provides what we find to be the best waterfowl birding location. It is here we have found Sand Hill cranes as well as ducks, swans and geese.

An option back at the right turn point off the main road, the main dirt road continues straight to a huge section of open fields. A lane that is gated is on the right. It is OK to park there, but do not block access to the gate. Obviously, if people are there, some kind of emergency can happen. Beyond the gate is a nice one-mile walk that can lead to black bear sightings, or even friendly encounters near the woods. We have had several bears run across the road 10 feet from us. Several paths cut right off the lane into woods and tall weeds and go down to the lake shore. Often quietly peeking through the tall weeds at lakeside gives great close contact to flocks of resting snow geese. Eagles, bears, deer and huge flocks of red-winged blackbirds are often feeding around the fields to the left of the gate. One time, while we ate our lunch along the lane, we watched a pair of eagles getting their lunch. Ours was peanut butter sandwiches, but theirs was red-wing blackbirds caught in mid-air. The eagles flew back to the trees on the right side of the lane, sometimes right over our heads.

Pungo Lake is known for its huge flocks of snow geese and tundra swans that fly out to feed in local fields and return in the evenings. You will need to leave the dirt roads before dark for sure.

Usually the reserve fields along Pat's Road are planted with winter wheat or cut corn. Huge flocks often land in these fields to feed right at dusk. We park safely off the pavement of Pat's Road and stand next to our vehicle with our parking lights

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