

# Stew In Brunswick

No county has more rare plants, animals and natural communities than Brunswick, but can these resources survive in the county's unprecedented growth and development?

BY LAWRENCE S. EARLEY

**M**ilitary Ocean Terminal, Sunny Point. We move through checkpoints surrounded by concrete bunkers and guarded by nervous young GIs with holstered firearms. "You need to leave your cameras and your cigarette lighters with me, sir," says a jittery soldier. We explain that we're with the two fellas in the car waiting ahead, one of whom is in charge of the base's natural areas, that we have no cigarette lighters, but that we most surely need our cameras. Flustered—they didn't explain that this post could be so complicated—the GI waves us on.

That's the way it is here at Sunny Point just a few weeks after hostilities ceased in the Persian Gulf. Things are slowing down now. The 12-hour-a-day, 7-day shifts loading pallets of 1,000-pound bombs for the F-16s are over, but there's still an air of anxious endeavor.

But we're not here to see this U.S. Army base on the lower Cape Fear River in Brunswick County in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf conflict. We're here to see the base's curious limesink ponds that were formed—a thousand years ago, 50 years ago or even more recently—when a layer of limestone many feet below the surface suddenly collapsed causing a water-filled depression that hosts, in many cases, a suite of 20 or 30 rare aquatic plants. Two of the most interesting are pondspice (*Litsea aestivalis*), an attractive and fragrant shrub in the bay family and a candidate for federal listing as an endangered or threatened species, and dwarf bladderwort (*Utricularia olivacea*) with white flowers so tiny that, as one botanist put it, they look like a handful of grits on the surface of the water. The ponds (most are less than an acre in size) are most numerous—200 or more—in Brunswick County, with 86 of the most interesting ones here at Sunny Point.

More important, we're also here to consider the ponds as a part for the whole, the whole being Brunswick County and its cornucopia of natural curiosities. Here to consider how or even whether this natural bounty will survive the frenzied growth that has thickened so many of the county's roads, riverfronts and beaches with new waterfront homes and golf courses, much of it in the last 10 years. Long a mecca for naturalists, the county is fast becoming a destination for retirees and a host of south-seeking migrants looking for a 9 a.m. tee-off.

We move from pond to pond. One is fringed with pond cypress, one lacks the cypress but unfurls a stand of grasses to the March breezes. And here's one with a dozen great blue herons that wheel in consternation above their nests, croaking like trolls. An anhinga rookery last year, now the pond serves the great blues. No checkpoints; no IDs. Just a quiet transfer of tenant rights. (Or did we just miss the avian brouhaha?)

FROM THE JUNE ISSUE OF  
**WILDLIFE**  
IN NORTH CAROLINA  
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Is there anything about Brunswick County that's ordinary? The county brims with singular natural attractions, stuck in seemingly inconsequential nooks and crannies like the freshwater ponds on the mainland side of Sunset Beach. That's where the wood storks congregate each year. Wood storks? They're fairly common in Florida, but you won't find them anywhere else in our state. Another animal more at home in Florida, a manatee, was washed up on a spoil island in the mouth of the Cape Fear River in 1986, a year before a shortnose sturgeon was hauled out of the Brunswick River. The fisherman was no more surprised than state biologists—it's the only place in North Carolina where that endangered sturgeon is considered to have a self-sustaining population. And consider the status of a tiny mollusk with a big name—the magnificent ramshorn. Bill Adams, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers biologist, found it in Orton Pond in 1986, just north of Sunny Point. Formerly found in Greenfield Lake in Wilmington, this snail is now unique to Brunswick County, unique to the state, and unique, it would seem, to the planet. On Bald Head Island grows the sabal palmetto, so common in our neighbor state to the south, but occurring only here in the old north state.

On the other side of the county, the Plymouth gentian (*Sabatia kennedyana*), appears along the Waccamaw River. Neighboring Horry County in South Carolina has a small population, and after that? Cape Cod and Nova Scotia, don't you know. In Juniper Creek, an acidic tributary stream of the Waccamaw River, lives the Carolina pygmy sunfish, found only here and in a single site in South Carolina.

Compared to this gaudy crew, the insect-eating marvel, the Venus fly-trap (*Dionaea muscipula*), is a mere carnival act. Its center of greatest world-wide abundance is Brunswick County, one of six plants found more plentifully here than in any other North Carolina county, while another half dozen are found nowhere else in North Carolina. The county runs, crawls and slithers with a copious collection of rare and endangered wildlife—alligators, peregrine falcons, bald eagles, ridley, green and loggerhead sea turtles, piping plovers, red-cockaded woodpeckers, crawfish frogs, Bachman's sparrows, brown pelicans, glossy ibises and black bears.

"Brunswick County has, by far, more records of rare plants, animals and significant natural communities than any other county in the state," says Alan Weakley of the state's Natural Heritage Program. "It's a center of distribution and endemism

for so many species that it's extraordinary." Under the Heritage Program's method of accounting, Brunswick County is a celebrity.

•More than 500 "natural heritage elements," or populations of rare plants and animals and high-quality natural communities. That's more than any other county in the state. Only three other counties have more than 300 of these elements of natu-

ral diversity.

•The only coastal county with more than 100 rare plant records.

•The only county with more than 20 natural areas of national and statewide significance.

And the reason for all this is an extraordinary diversity that comes partly, but not totally, from its geographical position at the southernmost tip of the state. Brunswick

County is bounded on its southern edge by the Atlantic Ocean, on its eastern and northern edge by the Cape Fear River, on its western edge by the Waccamaw River, and by Horry County, South Carolina, on its southwestern edge. These boundaries create a superabundance of aquatic, wetland and upland habitats for many diverse species.

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