

Discover interesting natural facts at Carolina's seashore

BY ALAN HODGE

Not everyone who goes to the Carolina coast is interested in golf, shopping, working on their tan, or invading the newest restaurant. For many folks, a trip to the seashore provides an opportunity to enjoy the many types of flora and fauna found there.

The salt marshes and flats that make up the backwaters of the Carolina beach zone are home to many species of crabs. One of the most common types is the Fiddler Crab. Fiddlers live in small burrows which they excavate in the soft salt mud. These burrows can be as long as two feet in length. During high tide, the crab plugs up the end of his burrow with mud and sits inside dry as a bone.

Another type of crab frequently seen at the beach is the Ghost Crab. This species scurries across the hot sand and dives into its burrow when danger approaches. The Ghost Crab's pale coloration and secretive ways are the reason for its name. Another reason is their nocturnal habits. Unlike the Fiddler Crab which prefers marshy areas, the Ghost Crab is generally found where conditions are dry.

In addition to these land crabs, there are several types which live either in coastal backwaters or the sea. Characterized by the blue tinges of coloration on its shell, the Blue Crab is a popular food item. Blue Crabs are often caught by beach goers using a long handled net and a fish head or chicken neck tied on a string to lure the crab in range.

Sometimes seen washed up on the beach, the Horseshoe Crab is a relic from the age of dinosaurs. The animal family to

which the Blue Crab belongs dates back over 600 million years. Not a true crab, nor a crustacean, the Horseshoe Crab is actually more closely related to spiders. A good time to see a live Horseshoe Crab is during late spring and early summer when they crawl ashore to breed.

Beach combing for shells is a popular pastime for many visitors to our state's coast. One type of shell, the Scotch Bonnet, is actually the official state seashell of North Carolina. A familiar sight to beach goers is the little Coquina Clam. These small mollusks are found in large numbers just at the water's edge and come in an amazing variety of colors. A tasty soup can be made from these little diggers by putting a bunch of them in boiling water.

Perhaps the most common shell type on the Carolina coast is the Ark Shell. Characterized by their "ribbed" appearance, Ark Shells can be from one to four inches wide. More than ten species are found in the Carolinas region.

Another common resident of the Carolina coast is the oyster. Found in backwater estuaries and sounds, the oyster lives in depths from waterline to 40 feet. Large numbers of oysters often group together in beds known as "rakes." An interesting fact about the oyster is that it changes gender several times throughout its lifespan. Large oysters are generally females.

Bird watching is a very popular activity along the North Carolina shore. Literally dozens of bird species call the Carolina coast home throughout the year. Ranging in size from tiny sandpipers to majestic pelicans and herons, these feathered residents play a vital role in maintaining

the ecological balance of nature.

Several types of birds can be seen scurrying along the Carolina surf line. These include the Sanderling, the Ruddy Turnstone, and the Willet. Soaring over the sea shore, the Brown Pelican is also a familiar sight. An interesting fact about Pelicans is their use of the sea surface to form a cushion of air under their wings. This gives them the ability to skim very close to the water for long distances.

Two stately bird types often seen at the beach are the Great White Heron and the Osprey. Standing about four feet tall, the Great White Heron is a wading bird that feeds on frogs, fish, and shrimp. A bird of prey, the Osprey has the ability to snatch its food directly from the water with sharp talons. The Osprey is in the same family as hawks and eagles.

The Carolina coast is home to an amazing variety of fish species. Little wonder that fishing ranks among the most popular pastimes for beach goers. Whether your fishing fancy is casting from the pounding surf, or perching on a pier, there are enough types of fish in the water to fill a cooler.

Popular types of fish along our shore include bluefish, croaker, spot, flounder and spotted weakfish or sea trout. For those with the desire for a fight, the King Mackerel and Red Drum are top choices. The world record Red Drum, a 94 pound monster, was reeled in from the Cape Hatteras surf several years ago. This same species is also our official state fish.



Cape Hatteras National Seashore
Photo courtesy of NC Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development

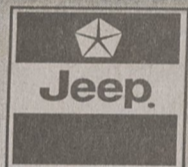
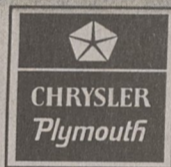
Sharks also inhabit the waters off our Carolina beaches. Don't worry, only five documented shark attacks have ever been recorded in our state. More folks die in the U.S. each year from bee stings and penicillin reactions than in 50 years of shark attacks. Types of sharks that one finds in North Carolina waters includes the Dogfish, Mako, Blacktip, and Lemon. Grasses form a vital link in

the survival of the dune structure along the Carolina shore. Two of the most important are Sea Oats and Beach Grass. Sea Oats range from Texas to Virginia and are native to the Carolina. Beach Grass is an introduced species. Both Sea Oats and Beach Grass help prevent erosion and build dunes by holding grains of sand in the root structure. Several types of trees are also

native to our state's coastal region. These include the Live Oak, Laurel Oak, Palmetto, and Yaupon Holly. Yaupon tea has been a curative tonic for coastal dwellers for hundreds of years. A landscape as richly diverse in animals and plants as any on earth, the Carolina seashore is a treasure chest of interesting natural facts waiting to be discovered.

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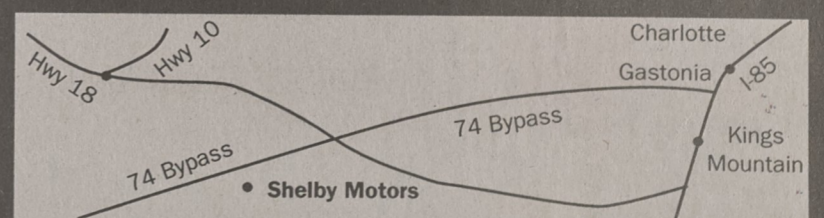
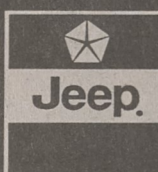
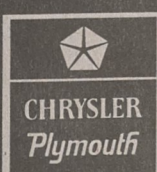
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