

OUR KIND OF PLACE

## Outer Banks Refuge

FINDING SOLITUDE AND SOLACE ON  
NORTH CAROLINA'S PEA ISLAND

By Caleb Johnson



We entered the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge without quite realizing it. Perhaps we'd missed a sign posted alongside North Carolina Highway 12, the lone two-lane linking the Outer Banks from top to bottom. Grass-covered dunes rose to the left until they blocked the Atlantic Ocean from sight, and to the right salt marsh stretched toward the muddy edge of the vast Pamlico Sound. Across the road from a visitor center, we stopped at a beach that was empty except for shorebirds dodging ragged waves crashing onto the sand.

Established in 1938 on land formerly owned by private waterfowl hunt clubs, the refuge covers 5,000 acres of maritime shrub and marsh and more than 25,000 acres of waters that lie about midway along the busy Atlantic Flyway, providing critical habitat for migrating birds. Some years, up to forty thousand

waterfowl winter there. On certain days, it's possible to spy twenty-five different species—northern pintail, redheads, and greater scaups that have stopped over until spring, when the avian action moves beachside, and piping plovers and bright-billed American oystercatchers strut the dunes in their finest plumage. This dynamic strip of land, ranging from just a few hundred yards to one mile across, has also become a sanctuary for my own family.

That first almost-accidental visit, my wife, Irina, and I let our old dog, Hugo, a dalmatian-blue heeler mix, trot along the beach as far as he wished. He stopped and nosed a knobbed whelk shell as large as a child's baseball mitt. A stretch later, Hugo found another big whelk partially buried in sand. He panted and grinned at us. This place, Irina and I agreed, was special. Standing at the ocean's edge, dunes hiding the highway at our backs, it felt a little like being alone at the end of the world.

I grew up appreciating solitary moments like this. Most of my childhood weekends were spent traipsing the deep woods covering my grandparents' forty acres in rural North Alabama. Armed with an uncle's hand-me-down machete and my own wild imagination, I honed some early storytelling chops by making up tall tales about things I encountered—animal bones, storm-blown trash, initials carved in tree trunks.

When I left the South to study creative writing a decade ago, I feared I'd lose the ability to write convincingly about the region. As it turns out, I found writing easier with a little psychological and geographical distance between me and my subject. While working on a novel, I often sought out solitary spaces to walk Hugo and let my mind wander. These became easier to find three years ago when I took a teaching position in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Close to home, but not quite smack in it.

Every summer, Irina and I now drive across the state to spend a week on the Outer Banks and visit Pea Island. The barrier islands are so unlike the Gulf Coast beaches I grew up visiting, where high-rise condos rather than dunes block views of the water. Spending time in the refuge rejuvenates us as few other places can.

I shared this feeling with Dr. Rebecca Harrison, Pea Island's supervisory wildlife biologist. She described what she calls the big *R* and the little *R* refuge. The former refers to the habitat itself, and the latter a deep sense of fulfillment she gets just being there. "We're all trying to find our place so much of the time," she said. "We're looking for connections. One of those to me is the natural world."

Record numbers of people have found comfort in nature since the start of the pandemic. Irina and I are no different. The year before our most recent trip to Pea Island was marked by loss as well as new life. Hugo died suddenly, less than two weeks after our son, Felix, was born during a storm that blanketed the pastureland surrounding our mountain home in several inches

At thirteen miles long, North Carolina's Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge spans dunes, beach, and marsh.

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of snow. We spent the winter mostly cooped up inside, adjusting to being parents, but in spring, we started hiking trails along the Blue Ridge Parkway. By summer, we were feeling more like our old selves.


On our most recent Outer Banks trip, we brought my parents. They watched Felix one morning while Irina and I drove from Kitty Hawk to Pea Island. We launched a tandem kayak off the beach. An oystercatcher swooped overhead, and I took it as a good sign. Throughout summer, terns, willets, black skimmers, and other wonderfully named birds also appear on the sand. We paddled out to the wreck of the *Oriental*, a Union steamer that ran aground in 1862 while carrying supplies and letters. Barnacles covered the stove-pipe-hat boiler, and swells made a great sucking sound as they rolled across the iron ship. I began imagining all the storms, all the seasons the wreck had endured. It felt a bit like glimpsing a rift in time, not unlike finding a relative's initials carved into the trunk of a poplar tree.

After eating ham-and-cheese sandwiches, we swam and watched brown pelicans cruise the breakers. Near the visitor center, we followed a footpath past a turtle-filled pond, then through a tangle of sea grape and live oak that eventually gave way to marsh. From a wooden observation tower, we could see most of Pea Island. The sound sprawled to the west, and to the east

it was difficult to tell where the ocean ended and the sky began. We were caught in between, marveling at how a precarious spit of land plays such an important role in protecting the mainland from storms and providing refuge for travelers on wing and foot alike.

Before leaving, Irina and I sprinkled some of Hugo's ashes on the beach and wrote his name in sand with our fingers. Not counting several gulls, we were alone again. We talked about how much we missed Hugo, and how we looked forward to bringing Felix with us next year so he could experience this extraordinary place for himself.

Later, thinking of this moment, I recalled a story Harrison told me about releasing a few loggerhead turtle hatchlings into the ocean one morning, she the lone witness to these prehistoric animals entering a new environment. I told her it must have been a spectacular sight. It was, she said, but she reminded me of the delight in seeing a common yellow-rumped warbler, or an oystercatcher banded last season return to the refuge from Florida. An indication that seasons are still changing, migrations are still happening. Things some of us maybe took for granted in the past.

"What I find more rewarding is the comfort of the ordinary," she said. After the last two years, I understood exactly what she meant. 



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