

Visitor Information

How to Find Us



The Bird Island Reserve is located in Brunswick County, south of Shallotte. From Hwy. 17 South, turn left onto N.C. 904; then turn right onto N.C. 179. It will become Sunset Beach Boulevard. Cross the Intracoastal Waterway onto Sunset Beach. At the “T” intersection with Main Street, turn right. Parking is permitted on the side of the road and near the 40th Street crossover. Walk west on the beach to get to the reserve boundary.

Access:

Cross at the 40th Street beach access and walk west, down the beach strand. The reserve may also be reached by boat from the Intracoastal Waterway using one of several creeks. A nature trail is located 1.5mi from the beach access.

Parking:

There are limited paid parking spaces at the 40th and Main Street intersection.

Guidance:

Beware of biting insects (flies, mosquitoes, ticks, chiggers), and poisonous plants (poison ivy). Sun protection is advised.

Facilities:

There are no public restrooms or facilities available at Bird Island Reserve.

Habitat:

Beach, dunes, grasslands, shrub thicket, salt marsh, and tidal flats.

Wildlife:

Typical barrier island birds, mammals, reptiles, plus rare and non-native plants and animals.

Natural features of Bird Island

The Bird Island Reserve has pristine sandy white beaches, high natural dunes, and over 1,000 acres of beautiful salt marsh and tidal creeks.

Creation of the Reserve

Bird Island was privately owned from 1771 through 2001. Since that time, the state of North Carolina purchased the Bird Island Reserve property with funds from N.C. Land and Water Fund, N.C. Natural Heritage Trust Fund, N.C. Department of Transportation, and the General Assembly, completing acquisition in 2021. Many years of local citizens' effort, particularly the Bird Island Preservation Society, contributed to the inclusion of Bird Island in the Coastal Reserve program.

Purpose of the Reserve

This natural area is one of 10 sites that make up the North Carolina Coastal Reserve & National Estuarine Research Reserve. Preservation of Bird Island Reserve allows this coastal ecosystem to be available as an outdoor laboratory where scientists, students and the public can learn about processes, functions and influences that shape and sustain the coastal area. Traditional uses, including recreation, are allowed as long as they do not disturb the environment or organisms or interfere with research and educational activities.



North Carolina Coastal Reserve & National Estuarine Research Reserve

Southern Sites Office
5600 Marvin K. Moss Lane
Wilmington, NC 28409
(910) 962-2324
deq.nc.gov/coastalreserve

Bird Island is managed by the N.C. Division of Coastal Management to protect the island's ecosystems and organisms for research, education and compatible uses. Support and assistance of the Bird Island Preservation Society and its volunteer stewards is gratefully acknowledged. This site is also a Dedicated State Nature Preserve.

The North Carolina Coastal Reserve & National Estuarine Research Reserve is a part of the N.C. Division of Coastal Management, a division of the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality.



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Rules & Tips For Visitors

BIRD ISLAND RESERVE

Sunset Beach, NC



- The reserve is open to visitors year round.
- Visit at your own risk. Sites are remote and conditions can include natural hazards such as insects and poisonous plants.
- Off-leash pets are prohibited.
- Fires, fireworks, target shooting, nudity, and camping are prohibited.
- Hunting is allowed as per state and local hunting rules.
- Producing noise that is disruptive to wildlife or other visitors is prohibited.
- Removal or disturbance of plants, animals, fungi, or cultural resources is prohibited.
- Littering is prohibited. Leaving any personal property unattended within the boundaries longer than 24 hours is prohibited.
- Recreational/off-road motorized vehicles are prohibited. Bicycles are allowed on the ocean beach.
- Written authorization is required for organized events, commercial activities, and other special activities.

For the most up to date rules and guidance visit: deq.nc.gov/reserve-rules

Bird Island Reserve

Upper beach

The area between the surf zone and the dunes is subject to harsh conditions like shifting sands, glaring sun, strong winds, salt spray, and storm surge. Only a limited number of species are specifically adapted to survive here. Flowering plants include sea rocket, orach, dune spurge, and seaside elder. Grasses such as sea oats and beach panic grass grow here.

The upper beach is a critical nesting area for loggerhead sea turtles. Some ground nesting birds such as the American oystercatcher, terns, black skimmer, and Wilson's plover build nests directly on the sand. The ghost crab makes deep tunnels under the sand to avoid predators and high temperatures.

Sand dunes

Plants are found in greater numbers as distance and elevation above sea level increase. The dune system at Bird Island has prominent frontal and secondary dunes, some in excess of 20 feet high. Sea oats are the dominant vegetation. Their extensive underground stem and root networks stabilize the dunes by literally holding the sand together.

Other dune plants such as croton, pennywort, and evening primrose are adapted to the windy conditions. They have flexible leaves and stems and grow close to the sand.

Maritime grasslands

The depression behind the sand dunes is better protected from salty wind and waves. Here, grass and herb species include saltmeadow cordgrass, broomsedge, carex, prickly pear cactus, peppergrass, blanket flower, goldenrod, marsh fimbry, pennywort, and beach morning glory.

The grasslands vary from seasonally or permanently wet in lower areas to well-drained in areas of higher elevation.

Maritime shrub thicket

Farther from the effects of the ocean, where salt spray and temperature variations are reduced, a mix of vine, shrub and tree species grows into a shrub thicket. White-tailed deer, non-native red fox, bobcat, opossum, raccoon, marsh rabbit, and cotton mouse use the shrub thicket for protection and shelter.

Salt marsh

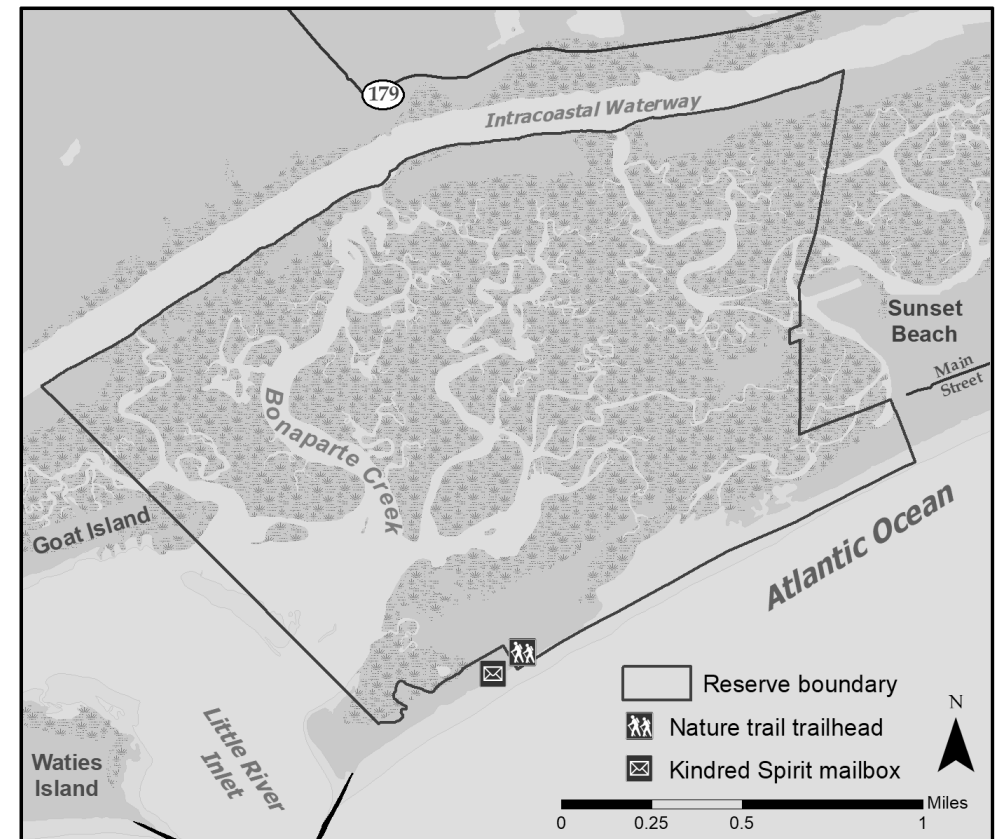
Lunar tides flood the intertidal salt marshes twice each day. Supratidal marshes remain above water except during occasional spring tides and storm tides.

Saltmarsh cordgrass, which dominates the intertidal marsh, is adapted to dramatic changes in salinity and temperature. This abundant, tall plant regulates salt concentrations in its cells by releasing excesses through pores on its blades.

Tidal mud flats

Expansive and seemingly barren flats are easy to see at low tide. Decaying marsh grass, or detritus, is deposited with each tide. These nutrients support a food web of crabs, fish, snails, and mussels.

Wading birds and shorebirds come to the exposed mud flats to feed during low tide. The sediments sometimes have a "rotten egg" smell due to the hydrogen sulfide gas produced as decomposers break down organic matter in the marsh.



Sea beach amaranth

Found in the foredune, this rare plant does not tolerate disturbance such as development, beach nourishment, and erosion. Only 55 populations are known to exist. As a result, the plant was listed as federally threatened in 1993.

Diamondback terrapin

The diamondback terrapin is a state species of special concern. It is the only reptile specifically adapted to survive in fresh or salt waters. It prefers the brackish water of the salt marsh. The shell of this reclusive turtle has distinctive diamond-shaped scales.

Loggerhead sea turtle

Female turtles crawl out of the sea to nest during the summer. Hatchlings mature in the sea and the females may return many years later to nest in the same region. It is estimated that only one in 1,000 of these threatened sea turtles will survive to adulthood.

Mammalian predators

Predator populations fluctuate from year to year. Clever predators, such as red fox and coyotes, use a variety of food sources and adapt readily to living in close association with human development. The result can be noticeable impacts to threatened and rare wildlife, including damaged sea turtle and shorebird nests.

Birds

The barrier island bird community includes brown pelican, Wilson's plover, black skimmer, ibis, gulls, herons, and egrets. Piping plover, willet, eastern painted bunting, wood stork, and several types of tern are present, but less common.