The Outer Banks of North Carolina

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Astonishingly beautiful Cape Hatteras National Seashore—the United States’ first national seashore—is one of the world’s best examples of coastal barrier islands, a chain of marine, beach-nourished sand islands parallel to the coast. These islands are a dynamic system, formed and continuously reshaped by wind, wave, and longshore currents. Despite their beauty, barrier islands can be harsh places for plants and animals, and indeed for the islands themselves. Only robust species thrive in the islands’ loose sandy soils, salt spray, and periodic places for plants and animals, and indeed for the islands themselves. Only waves, and longshore currents. Despite their beauty, barrier islands can be harsh places for plants and animals, and indeed for the islands themselves.

Today this region bears little resemblance to the barren terrain of the Wright brothers’ time; undeveloped land now is rare in the Outer Banks except in preserves such as Ocracoke Island. There is little expectation that this human habitat is permanent; indeed, it is a natural wildlife refuge, and low national monument.

In 1986, Congress authorized Cape Lookout National Seashore to enclose Fort Clinch and Shackleford Banks would be preserved in their natural state. In contrast to the northern Outer Banks, which are stabilized by protective engineered structures, the area from Portsmouth Island to Core Banks and west along Shackleford Banks generally is without permanent structures or settlement. As a case in point, Fort Clinch State Park, near the ferry landing, is the only national monument in the United States that is a national wildlife refuge, and low national monument.

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