

Natural Treasure Island

Bald Head Island remains a place where wildlife and humans coexist in quiet harmony

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Guide Maureen Dewire and two visitors take a sunset-guided kayak tour of creeks in the marsh land between Bald Head Island and Middle Island.

Photos provided by Wessel Kok

songbird. That's according to the National Audubon Society. I had never heard of them until the day before, when I arrived. Bald Head Island's maritime forest preserve has one of the country's largest populations of breeding buntings, so I decided I had to see one.

For years I had ignored this car-free island at the southeastern tip of North Carolina because I assumed it was all one big development with a golf course. I was partly right. At the south end of Smith Island, measuring one mile wide and three miles long, are about 1,060 homes and condos, most of them owned by North Carolinians, and about 1,000 more to come, most being built by Bald Head Island Limited. But that's only part of the story. I discovered that 10,000 of the island's 12,000 acres have been set aside for conservation. And what is being preserved is worth checking out.

Our sighting of the painted bunting came after a two-hour hike filled with natural treasures. We were on the Creek Trail in the Bald Head Woods Coastal Reserve, from which you can hear waves crashing on the beach in the distance. The nearly mile-long trail had been cut recently by volunteers and staff at the nonprofit Bald Head Island Conservancy, where Dewire is senior naturalist. The conservancy runs programs year-round, has a gift shop and visitors center, and is raising money to build a barrier-island research facility. It also coordinates the nationally recognized Sea Turtle Protection Program, because the island is an important nesting site from May through October.

On our walk, Dewire pointed out 300-year-old live oak trees, a variety of laurels and a massive felled trunk that a yellow-bellied sapsucker had left looking like a cribbage board. Before searching for the painted buntings, we spotted a red fox.

The hush of traffic

Certainly a big contributor to conservation here is the absence of visitors' cars. The inn we stayed at provides guests with golf carts, as much of the lodging here does. But most of the time we used bicycles rented from an island shop. Except for the occasional maintenance and public safety vehicles and the more frequent "beep, beep, beep" of carts backing up, the island is blessedly free of traffic sounds.

BALD HEAD ISLAND - Golf carts glided by as our small group stood by the road listening to Maureen Dewire, our guide, play one of her favorite songs: the high-pitched call of the painted bunting. She aimed her iPod with attached speaker toward where she thought one of the brightly colored birds was perched.

"Let's see if we can get his attention," she said.

The bird answered back, and she spotted him high up on a newly leafing limb on this early spring day.

"They're here all summer, but you don't see them because the males stop singing by late July," Dewire, 30, said of the painted buntings, which winter in South Florida, Cuba and the Bahamas.

The painted bunting's rainbow of colors -- red chest, blue head, green back -- make it perhaps North America's most spectacular

Bicycles and golf carts share the 26 miles of narrow roads, which can get a bit crowded in summer. The year-round population of 220 can swell to 6,000 in high season, including boatloads of day-trippers. The 25-minute ferry ride from the middle-class coastal town of Southport offers a first glimpse of the people who frequent Bald Head Island. Dressed-down folks carrying cameras and day packs share bench space with those attired in pressed Polo button-downs, some toting Louis Vuitton handbags. Some come just for a round of golf at the Bald Head Island Club.

A new Nantucket

Bald Head's main harbor and village area resembles Nantucket, Mass. -- if Nantucket had been built starting in 1983. That's when the most recent and only successful owners, the George P. Mitchell family, stepped in to form Bald Head Island Limited.

Although the developer clearly respects the natural surroundings, a rarefied air hangs over the clusters of multimillion-dollar homes. While houses are closely ringed by trees and thick flora, they also look just homogeneous enough to be a touch Orwellian, all the way down to the little blue signposts announcing that a house or lot is for sale.

"It's a little too precious for me," said John Spear of Spruce Head Island, Maine, a day-tripper who was vacationing in the area. "It's too manicured."

Other visitors, however, are nuts about the place.

"My parents have been coming here for years," said Roberta Fenska of New Jersey, who was on our hiking tour. "I say, 'Don't you want to go someplace different next year?' And they say, 'No, there's no place like Bald Head.'"

One attraction not to be missed is Old Baldy, the Bald Head Island Lighthouse. The oldest lighthouse in the state, Baldy was built in 1817 and, though its light was extinguished in 1935, still draws a stream of visitors. Every other golf cart, it seems, sports an "I Love Old Baldy" bumper sticker. The brick and concrete on the 110-foot-tall octagonal tower is so worn it looks like camouflage -- a patchy pattern that is repeated on gift shop magnets, needlepoint renderings and illustrations. For \$3, visitors can climb the 108 steps to the top. From there, you can see miles of mostly pristine beaches and an incredible amount of green space, as well as remnants of 1.7 miles of earthen fortifications from Civil War days. Even earlier, in the 1700s, Blackbeard and other pirates terrorized this coast. Before that, Native Americans lived on the island and the mainland.

On the water

The water is as much a lure as the land. If you want to arrive by boat, the Bald Head Island Marina and Yacht Club has space for 155 vessels. We went on a sunset kayak tour offered through the conservancy, a gentle paddle up a couple of creeks. White ibis flew over, heading for a salt marsh hammock and sanctuary on Middle Island, a smaller strip of land developed as Middle Island Plantation, with 94 sites. What was historically Smith Island is referred to now as Smith Island Complex and includes Bald Head, Middle and Bluff islands.