



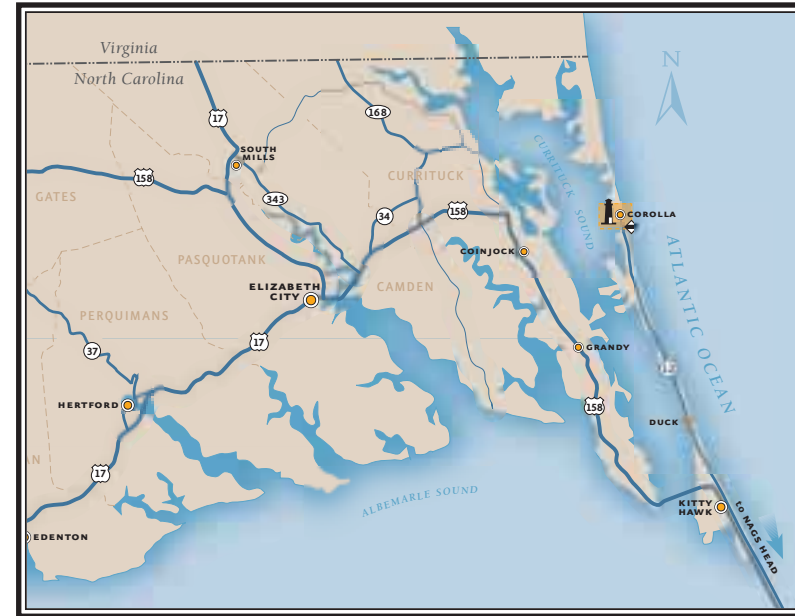
F. EUGENE HESTER

**T**iny paw prints of a fox dotted the sand near the new Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education in Corolla. There were deer tracks, too, and raccoon. A flock of geese honked on a nearby pond, and a couple of tundra swans flew low over the marsh, straining against a stiff wind.

Nestled along the shoreline of the Currituck Sound, at the edge of a marsh and a maritime forest, the 22,000-square-foot education center offers indoor exhibits and outdoor classes on the state's coastal wildlife, habitat, people and culture. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission leases three acres from Currituck County on the grounds of the historic Whalehead Club. The 131-year-old Currituck Beach Lighthouse sits just a few hundred yards to the north.

The idea is to make one trip to visit all three places — the Whalehead Club, the education center and the lighthouse. “We want to make the entire heritage here a single experience,” said Clarence Styron, director of the education center. Adjacent to the center is a strip of land, owned by the state, that runs about 2,500 feet from ocean to sound where education center experts conduct many of the outdoor classes. “What you end up getting is a cross section of a coastal barrier strip,” said Mark Buckler, the center’s program coordinator.

The Whalehead Club was a private hunting lodge and retreat built in the 1920s by Edward C. and Mary Louise LaBel Knight of Philadelphia. The Knights, like many wealthy Northerners of the period, were drawn to the area by the excellent



MAP BY VICTORIA CUMBEE

THE OUTER BANKS CENTER FOR WILDLIFE EDUCATION HELPS REVEAL THE CULTURAL AND NATURAL HISTORY OF THE UNIQUE CURRITUCK REGION.

*written by Jeffrey Hampton  
photographed by Mark Buckler*

# SOUND TRADITIONS







“ THIS CENTER IS IMMENSELY VALUABLE IN THAT IT WILL PRESERVE SO MUCH OF WHAT HAS SLIPPED AWAY FROM US IN EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA.”

—Paul O’Neal



Exhibits at the Outer Banks center range from a coastal marsh and outboard motors (top) to fishing artifacts (middle). Activities for children and adults already were taking place prior to the building’s official opening.

waterfowl hunting on Currituck Sound. They built the 21,000-square-foot “cottage by the sound” for \$385,000. When the Knights died in 1936, the house passed through a series of owners and uses until it was left to the elements in the 1970s. In 1992, Currituck County bought the property and restored it at a cost of more than \$5 million. Volunteers conduct tours through the home daily, telling the story of the Knights and local people who worked there.

Some 100,000 people a year climb the lighthouse, and even more visit but don’t make the climb up the spiraling stairs. From the top of the 162-foot structure, visitors get a panoramic view of the beach and ocean to the east, the coastline to the north and south and Currituck Sound to the west. The Outer Banks Conservationists, a nonprofit group, opened the lighthouse to the public in 1991. Nearby, visitors also can visit the restored lighthouse keeper’s house.

#### NATURE CLOSE AT HAND

Corolla draws thousands of tourists each week in high season, but for most of the 20th century it was a quiet, remote village where people made their livings from the sea and the sound. The center’s main building itself reflects that heritage. Constructed off the ground on large pilings to ride out high water, its architecture is reminiscent of the old lifesaving stations once prevalent along the coastline.

The center has offered wildlife and photography classes since 2002. The programs and nature film screenings are free, but reservations are required for most workshops. In a few minutes, Buckler can be pointing out the difference between raccoon tracks and opossum tracks in his class on finding animal trails. His nature photography classes often follow a boardwalk a few hundred feet long that winds first through maritime forest, then through a freshwater marsh before reaching out into the Currituck Sound. Buckler himself is often out there, lugging a camera with a huge telephoto lens.

One spring afternoon, it took only a few minutes to disappear into low growing trees that form a sort of shady tunnel over the boardwalk. Yellow-rumped warblers flitted from limb to limb with short, high-pitched chirps. A mourning dove sat on the ground next to the boardwalk. As the forest gave way to the marsh, a deer trail about a foot wide passed under the boardwalk and through the black needle rush and cord grass.

One of the most popular classes is the herp hunt, a search for reptiles and amphibians. This group looks for lizards, turtles, frogs and even snakes on purpose — and finds them. “We see water moccasins [cottonmouths] all the time,” Buckler said. During one hunt, the group watched for a couple of hours as nine cottonmouths, a venomous species common on the North Carolina coast, swam along the shoreline. Of course, the group remained a safe distance away.

Sign up for a class on crabbing, or do it on your own. Sitting in the afternoon sun, families spend hours dangling a chicken neck tied to a string into the shallow water. Blue crabs grab the bait and usually hang on long enough to be pulled from the water and scooped into a net.

“We have enjoyed every class we’ve taken,” said Pete Tucker, who with his wife, Polly, moved to Corolla five years ago after retiring from a 40-year career in sales. “The one I enjoyed the most was the duck carving class.” Under the direction of Chandler Sawyer, an educator with the wildlife center, Tucker carved his first duck decoy, a scaup, more commonly known as a bluebill in these parts. Tucker has since bought supplies to carve more ducks. “I may be taking up a new hobby,” he said.

#### A TRADITION OF DECOYS

Sawyer, a Currituck native, comes from a long line of hunters and carvers. Not only does he teach simple decoy carving to his classes, he does it as a professional and is knowledgeable on the wildlife center’s collection of about 250 decoys. In 1994, the Whalehead Preservation Trust bought the collection of Neal Conoley Jr., executive director of the North Carolina Aquarium Society and author of “Waterfowl Heritage: North Carolina’s Decoys and Gunning Lore.” That collection is now on loan to the education center.

Conoley began collecting decoys in 1967 while he was in college. He visited the shops of some of the remaining carvers when he came east for duck hunting. When hunting season was slow, he’d hang around old-time carvers to talk. He bought a few bird decoys for as little as \$10 simply because he liked them, not fully knowing what he was getting. Waterfowl decoy collecting didn’t become an expensive, nationwide hobby until about 10 years later.

Old carvers didn’t intend the decoys to be works of art, they were for making a

living, Sawyer said. They sawed out a block of juniper, rough-shaped it with a hatchet and refined it a little with a wood rasp and a spoke shave. Juniper was light, easy to carve and durable. The idea was to get a big stand of decoys to attract more ducks. “They didn’t care about how pretty they looked,” Sawyer said. “They just wanted to bring in the ducks.”

Hunting guides handled the decoys roughly, grabbing them by the heads and tossing them in and out of the boat. The decoys were often larger than life-size to be better seen by fast-flying ducks at long distances.

The collection is representative of several of the region’s decoy makers, each with his own style. Alvirah Wright of Camden, Joe Hayman of Coinjock, Bob Morse and Ned Burgess of Churches Island and Cecil Stevens of Knotts Island are among the carvers represented. The oldest decoy in the collection is a rare ruddy duck made in 1885 by John Williams of Knotts Island.



Educator Chandler Sawyer, great-grandson of noted decoy carver Bob Morse, brings the Currituck tradition alive in his carving classes.







TODD PUSSEY



TODD PUSSEY

**Wildlife is plentiful on the Outer Banks. In the sound, a great blue heron hunts from a crab pot, while a Carolina water snake wriggles across the sand.**

Burgess, who died more than 40 years ago, is among the most famous of the decoy makers in the state. He worked from his shop with hand tools, elegantly crafting the wood even though he had only one good eye. Many collectors consider Burgess' decoys to be the most stylish of the time. Some writers have marveled how Burgess could have incorpo-

rated art deco techniques into his carving when he lived in Currituck County without much outside influence. Burgess sold some of his decoys for as little as 25 cents apiece. Now they are worth thousands of dollars.

Sawyer is the great-grandson of Morse, the renowned carver who lived just across the sound from the education center, and carves decoys for sale. Sawyer uses a band saw to cut out some of his decoys, but he also reverts to the old methods of chopping the rough shape with a hatchet and smoothing it out with a rasp and spoke shave. "I like it because it's old-school," he said.

#### HERITAGE ON DISPLAY

Many of the exhibits include authentic pieces of hunting and fishing gear from when waterfowl migrated to the North Carolina coast by the millions and fish filled the sound. Even the replicas were built by local boat builders. Milfred Austin, an 81-year-old native of Currituck County, built two models of a Currituck skiff—one 20 inches long and the other 4 feet long—for display at the education center.

The Currituck skiffs, made with flat bottoms, could float in water only a few inches deep, just right for maneuvering around the shallow shorelines and creeks of the sound. Most often, the skiffs were used for waterfowl hunting, which at one time was big business in the Currituck area.

The skiffs slipped easily into blinds made by sticking thick, green pine limbs into a wooden frame firmly attached to the bottom of the sound. Hundreds of blinds dotted the Currituck Sound. They still do. Guides could also fit the skiffs with a light wooden frame made to hold pine limbs, converting the boat itself into what was called a float blind. The boat displays will feature 12 to 15 miniature models of vessels used to hunt and fish on the eastern sounds.

"This center is immensely valuable in that it will preserve so much of what has slipped away from us in eastern North Carolina," said Paul O'Neal, chairman of the Currituck County Board of Commissioners. His family has hunted and fished the local waters for generations. "We're very excited."

Within the exhibit hall is a diorama of a marsh, a duck blind and a 12,000-gallon aquarium that is home to native aquatic species. The Wild Store offers the typical supply of T-shirts and hats, but also items not normally available in a tourist stop, such as decoys that look much like those made years ago by the hunters of the area. A 20-minute film that shares the title of the hall's exhibit "Life By Water's Rhythms," shows regularly each day in the auditorium.

Exhibits interpret the region's wildlife, the Atlantic Flyway, the people, and the boats and gear they used to make a living fishing and hunting on the sounds. One display focuses on the sink box. Hunters hid in the wooden compartments just below the water surface until waterfowl flew overhead. Sitting among the decoys, the sink boxes were so effective that they eventually were outlawed.

The education center in Corolla is one of three operated by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. The Pisgah Center for Wildlife Education near Brevard offers classes on fishing and stream ecology in the Mountain region. The Centennial Campus Center for Wildlife Education is on the N.C. State University campus in Raleigh. The center's exhibits, scheduled to open late 2006, focus on the Piedmont region. ◆

*Jeffrey Hampton writes about the Outer Banks for The Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, Va.*