

WALKING ON COUNTRY ROADS

WRITTEN BY JOHN MANUEL



Don't let the paved paths fool you: The Coastal portion of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail offers a wealth of views, history and challenges

FOR THOSE HIKING THE MOUNTAINS-TO-SEA TRAIL FROM WEST to east, Falls Lake Dam north of Raleigh marks the start of a long trek across the North Carolina Coastal Plain. Much of this eastern section is on paved roads, and will be for the foreseeable future. But to avoid it for that reason would be a mistake, for this section envelops hikers in a fascinating topography, history and culture—one that cannot be found on any other trail in the country.

The N.C. Division of State Parks is pursuing two land routes for the eastern portion of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST). One route would parallel the Neuse River through the towns of Smithfield, Goldsboro, Kinston and New Bern. Those towns currently have segments of trail under construction or in planning, but little of the land in between has been secured. For now, hikers are following a second route known as the Coastal Crescent Trail that curves south for 378 miles through a checkerboard of public and private land. Both routes will link up near Cherry Point on Pamlico Sound and proceed to the eastern terminus at Jockey's Ridge.

The Coastal portion completes our three-part series on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, which runs 1,175 miles from Clingmans Dome in the Mountains to Jockey's Ridge on the Outer Banks. Each region that the trail cuts through provides its own unique experience, including mountain



The rising sun backlights a morning mist in a longleaf pine savannah at Holly Shelter Game Land.

PETE WETZEL



The Mountains-to-Sea Trail passes a variety of historical landmarks and natural wonders on its 1,175-mile journey across the state. Hikers in Holly Shelter Game Land should keep an eye out for exotic native plants like pitchers (be sure to only look, because these plants are illegal to pick). In Johnston County, the trail leads to the Bentonville Battlefield Historic Site, which commemorates the largest Civil War battle in North Carolina and allows visitors to trace its progress. Further east, the rare Bachman's sparrow, which spends more time scurrying on the ground than in flight, makes a home among the longleaf pines in Croatan National Forest.



streams and views in the West, rolling forests and fields and a plethora of wildlife in the Piedmont, and now the unique country roads ultimately leading to sandy beaches in the Coastal Plain.

PEANUTS AND SWEET POTATOES

The eastern segment of the MST starts atop the Neuse River Trail, a paved greenway that parallels the river for 33 miles around Raleigh. Located within a metropolitan area of more than 1 million people, the Neuse River Trail is heavily used by walkers, runners, bikers and rollerbladers. Despite its intensive use, the trail brings hikers surprisingly close to nature as it winds through a wooded corridor of ash, river birch and sycamore. Herons stalk riverbanks, hawks watch from trees. Here and there, remains of old stone dams and abandoned bridge pylons appear in the underbrush. Three city parks—Horseshoe, Milburnie and Anderson Point—allow for more expansive exploration, as do connecting trails leading to Durant Nature Park, Crabtree Creek and Walnut Creek.

The Neuse River Trail ends about a mile-and-a-half east of Clayton and, except for a short greenway through Smithfield, the MST's Coastal Crescent route proceeds strictly along paved roads for the next 29

miles. Few of us are in the habit of walking roads for pleasure, but it can be a pleasurable experience. South of Interstate 95, the route follows a two-lane road called the Devil's Racetrack through the state's agricultural heartland. To either side, fields planted in tobacco, soybeans, peanuts and cotton stretch to forested horizons. Dogs bark from the yards of brick ranch homes. Traffic is light and the walking is easy.

"I really enjoyed the road walking sections," said Jennifer Pharr Davis, an Asheville native who hiked the entire MST in 2017. "I didn't know what peanuts or sweet potatoes looked like in the field. It was harvest season when I walked through, so all the farmers were out working. That's not something you get to see in the mountains."

Road walking the eastern section is best done in the fall, when temperatures and humidity are low. The landscape at that time is a tapestry of color—electric green fescue cover crops, crimson oaks and, most often, an azure blue sky. The air is filled with the calling of crows and the hum of combines.

Nine miles along on the Devil's Racetrack, hikers reach Howell Woods Environmental Learning Center. Operated by Johnston Community College, Howell Woods is a 2,800-acre preserve that includes mature bottomland hardwood forest, open fallow

and managed wildlife fields, mixed pine and hardwood forest, and a three-quarter mile stretch adjacent to the Neuse River. The center offers regularly scheduled learning programs, birdwatching, fishing, canoeing and other outdoor activities. Most importantly, the Center offers hikers that rarity on the MST—overnight lodging in one of two cabins (reservations are required).

Further south, the MST diverts off the Racetrack and past the Bentonville Battlefield State Historic Site. Little known to anyone but history buffs, Bentonville was the site of the largest Civil War battle in North Carolina, with 17,000 Confederate troops under Joseph Johnston facing 60,000 Union troops under William Tecumseh Sherman. The battle raged for two days in the fields and forests around Bentonville, until Johnston was forced to retreat. Displays at the visitor's center depict the progress of the battle, as well as weapons and tools from that era.

Behind the center, a trail leads into the woods, past trench lines dug by Union

Opposite page: Walkers on the Neuse River Trail admire the scenery below Falls of Neuse Road. Fox squirrels huddle together in a tree cavity.





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soldiers. One can almost hear the shovels hitting the dirt and the grouching of the troops so far from home. The Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (Friends) and the N.C. Division of Historic Sites and Properties are working on extending this network of trails to serve as a loop of the MST. If all goes as planned, this extension should be completed by the end of 2018.

“We are all clamoring for opportunities to get off road,” said Bill Scott, vice president of the Friends and task force leader of Segment 12B. “The trail through Bentonville will allow hikers to get immersed in history, as well as nature.”

CAROLINA BAY COUNTRY

From Bentonville, the MST continues south on two-lane roads, crossing over Great and Little Coharie creeks, through the towns of Newton Grove and Roseboro, and across the South River before reaching Suggs Mill Pond Game Land. Suggs Mill marks the start of the MST’s journey through Carolina Bay country, the name given to the hundreds of mysterious oval depressions, one-quarter to several

miles in diameter, found throughout the Southeastern Coastal Plain. Some of these depressions are filled with water and named as lakes. Others are covered with thick vegetation, including black gum, bald cypress, sweet bay, magnolia and pond pine. All manner of songbirds live in these wooded bays, as do coyotes, bobcats and some of the biggest black bears in the state.

The MST follows forest roads for 4 1/2 miles through Suggs Mill Pond Game Land, then goes back on a paved road for 13 miles through the church-filled community of White Oak. Beyond White Oak, the trail follows sand roads through the Bladen Lakes State Forest and, finally, a legitimate footpath—the Bay Trail—around the southwest rim of Jones Lake. Some hikers consider the Bay Trail to be the highlight of the entire eastern segment of the MST. The trail winds for more than a mile through a tunnel of fetterbush in the understory, bay trees in the midstory and pond pine in the canopy. Even in the dead of winter, the vegetation is a lush green.

From Jones Lake, the MST follows sand roads through the Turnbull Creek State

Educational Forest, a paved road around the heavily developed shores of White Lake, then back on a sand road around Lake Singletary. Judging by the tracks on this road, wildlife is prolific in this area. Traveling in the morning or late evening, hikers have a decent chance of seeing fox, coyote and black bear.

State parks at Jones Lake and Lake Singletary allow overnight camping in season. (Visit ncparks.gov for more information about camping in state parks.) In addition, the Friends have been recruiting a network of “Trail Angels” along the route who are prepared to offer hikers a place to shower and spend the night. Among these Angels are Carl and Dianne DeAndrade, owners of White Lake Marine on the shores of White Lake, and Richard Smith, proprietor of the Kelly Historical Museum housed in the former Centerville Baptist Church in Kelly. These Angels say hosting hikers is as much a pleasure for them as it is for the hikers.

“All the hikers who’ve come by were different and all of them interesting,” Smith said. “And so far, the women outnumber the men.”

OVER THE RIVER?

Leaving Carolina Bay country, the MST follows backroads past a number of historical sites. These include the Canetuck Community Center, housed in a two-room Rosenwald schoolhouse built for African-American children in 1921; Moore’s Creek Battlefield, site of the first Patriot victory in the American Revolution; and the town of Burgaw, whose many historical buildings include the oldest train depot in North Carolina.

From Burgaw, the Friends would like the trail to go due east into Holly Shelter Game Land, but that requires crossing the Cape Fear River, where there are no bridges. “We hope to find people who have boats who would be willing to ferry hikers across,” said Kate Dixon, executive director of the Friends. “Until then, hikers will have to go north to the Camp Kirkwood Road bridge.”

Holly Shelter Game Land is vast and gorgeous, one of the natural gems of eastern North Carolina. The MST follows sand roads south through the game land beneath stands of longleaf pine. Sharp-eyed hikers

will find carnivorous plants here, including sundews, pitcher plants and Venus fly traps. (Harvesting these plants is strictly illegal.) As in other game lands, hunting is allowed for deer and bear in the fall and wild turkey in the spring, so hikers should be cautious during these seasons and wear blaze orange hats and vests.

Leaving Holly Shelter, the MST crosses U.S. 17 and heads out onto Topsail Beach. Readers no doubt associate walking on the beach with sunshine and good times, but long-distance hikers may face some challenging circumstances.

“When I hiked Topsail Beach, everything was perfect,” Pharr Davis said. “There were dolphins playing in the surf and I was walking on solid sand. But when I got to the Outer Banks, it was windy and the tide was high, so I had to walk on soft sand. I came off crying because I was so exhausted.”

Pharr Davis said planning is the key to an enjoyable hike on the beach. Hikers should check tide charts and plan to hike during low tide. Windy days should be avoided, if possible.

Opposite: “Trail Angel” Richard Smith hosts hikers for the night in the Kelly Historical Museum. The author hikes the Bay Trail past some young longleaf pines. A century-old longleaf pine stump bears the scars of a “hack and dipper” used to extract resin for the making of turpentine. A red-cockaded woodpecker delivers food to its fledglings in a longleaf pine cavity. Above: Cypress trees are reflected on the still surface of Suggs Mill Pond.



KEVIN ADAMS

A highlight of the Coastal portion of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail is the Bodie Island Lighthouse. Coquina clams can be found on the beaches of the Outer Banks. Opposite: A red fox family rests in the dunes along the Outer Banks.

Leaving Topsail Island, the MST heads north through Stones Creek Game Land, following fire breaks through pines and around swamps and lakes. Task force leader Tim Supple and volunteers have made boardwalks using planks they found in the marsh from docks destroyed by Hurricane Matthew.

"It cleans up the environment and saves money for the MST," Supple said.

From the game land, the trail heads to the town of Jacksonville and its paved greenway. Beside that greenway is a stirring memorial to the Vietnam War dead. Fittingly, from Jacksonville on through the Croatan National Forest, the air is often filled with the boom of artillery, the clatter of helicopters and the roar of jets. That is owing to the presence of several nearby military bases, including Camp Lejeune and Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point. The noise is not conducive to pleasant hiking, but it is the necessary sound of a nation in a state of military preparedness.

Entering the Croatan National Forest from the south, the trail follows sand roads between pine forests and shrub swamps, known as pocosins. In 2002, the U.S. Forest Service initiated a long-term plan for the Croatan that calls for restoring the landscape to pre-European settlement conditions. That includes removing non-native tree species, mainly loblolly pine, and replanting it with native longleaf pine. Hikers may not immediately notice the difference between the two species, but on close inspection, the long needles, bigger cones and tighter bark pattern of the latter become evident. The naturally broad spacing of longleaf pines lends a savannah-like appearance to the land. This attracts rare birds such as Bachman's sparrow and red-cockaded woodpecker. Hikers may see other wildlife, including a variant of the Eastern fox squirrel sporting a black body and white nose and feet (mittens).

Heading east, the MST reaches the shores of the Neuse River and the start of the Neusiok Trail, which at 21 miles is the longest continuous hiking trail in eastern North Carolina. The scenery at the start of this trail is dramatic. Sandy bluffs offer magnificent views of the 3-mile-wide river, dotted in fall and winter with rafts of buffhead and ruddy ducks. The trail heads



KEVIN ADAMS

north for several miles through a lovely forest of live oak, holly and wax myrtle, then curves south for a long trek through the pines.

From the end of the Neusiok, it's a 45-mile-long slog on paved roads to the ferry terminal to the Outer Banks. Along the way, hikers will catch their first glimpse of Coastal marshes and the wading birds that frequent this habitat. They will pass through the fishing villages of Smyrna, Williston, Davis and Stacy. At the end of the stretch, hikers can relax on an N.C. Department of Transportation ferry and let the diesel engines do the walking across Pamlico Sound to Ocracoke Island.

HUGGING THE COAST

Once on Ocracoke, the MST proceeds through the historic village and out to the beach. Ocracoke and neighboring Hatteras Island's beachfront are part of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and, thus, free of development. For most of the next 81 miles, hikers follow a route bordered by sand dunes and sea oats on the left and open ocean on the right. Gulls and pelicans glide past, while sandpipers and sanderlings skitter at the edge of the waves.

The MST makes three welcome diversions off the beach. The first, on Hatteras



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Island near the National Park Service's Frisco Campground, follows the Open Ponds Trail through a lovely forested area before returning to the beach. The second takes hikers on the North Pond Trail through the heart of the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge. In late fall and winter, the refuge is thick with all manner of ducks, geese and swans. The third diversion is an old trail that once led from N.C. Highway 12 to the grounds of Bodie Island Lighthouse. The so-called Off Island Trail has not been maintained by the National Park Service in recent years, but the Friends are hoping this can be restored and made part of the MST.

One other diversion of note is the passage from Hatteras Island to Bodie Island across Oregon Inlet. Currently, the MST sends hikers onto the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge, but owing to the narrowness of the shoulder, this bridge is dangerous to cross on foot. The state is in the process of building a new bridge, scheduled for completion in November 2018, which will include a wide shoulder for hikers and bikers.

"That will be a plus for hikers in more ways than one," said Allen Poole, task force leader for the Outer Banks portion of the MST. "Because of the incredible views, this new bridge crossing could be the highlight of Segment 18."

The grand finale of the west-to-east hike is the ascent up Jockey's Ridge, the tallest sand dune on the East Coast. Hikers dig their boots in the sand and rise above the surrounding forest to a commanding 360-degree view of ocean, bank and sound. The wind blows while kites and hang gliders color the sky. The end of the thousand-mile journey looks and feels as it should—at the edge of a continent.

Relatively few people will ever hike the entire length of the MST, but many will hike individual portions. As they and the many volunteers and communities along the route join in building and experiencing this trail, all will gain a greater appreciation for this state and its people.

"I thought I knew North Carolina," said Pharr Davis at the end of her cross-state hike. "I was born and raised here, but there were many parts of the state I didn't have a feel for. I met so many people on my journey. I found that we aren't all that different." ♦

John Manuel is a regular contributor to Wildlife in North Carolina. Collections of his writing can be found at jmanuel.com.

ART ON THE TRAIL

For the past eight years, Autumn Cobeland has been painting landscapes of the more than 100 miles of greenways that cut through Raleigh and connect many of the city's parks. Now, the Raleigh native and professional artist has gone off the beaten path to combine two of her passions: artwork and the outdoors.

Cobeland has collaborated with the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail to produce a collection of four prints depicting scenes at various points along the 1,175-mile Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST). The goal of the partnership is to "call attention to the beauty of the trail," Cobeland said. The paintings do not depict specific locations on the MST but rather provide a general feeling of the scenery found on the trail in the Mountains, Piedmont and Coastal Plain. They are based off photographs or visits to Mount Mitchell, Singletary Lake, Haw River and the Outer Banks.

Cobeland, who works out of the Artspace studios in downtown Raleigh and recently organized a community art project for the 130-year anniversary of Pullen Park, is donating 10 percent of the proceeds from her MST artwork to the Friends group. She made similar contributions based off her greenway artwork and has donated roughly \$12,000 to the Triangle Greenway Council and the City of Raleigh.

"I'm excited for the Mountains-to-Sea Trail," said Cobeland, who regularly hikes with her husband and two children. "I just love what they're trying to do. I'm excited to see more of the trail."

Each 11-by-14-inch MST print is printed with archival ink on rag archival watercolor paper, and is signed by Cobeland. Individual prints cost \$49; a set of eight greeting cards costs \$24. Prints can be purchased at autumncobelandpaintings.com.

—Josh Leventhal

