

## Exploring the Alligator River Refuge

Another downed tree blocks our watercourse on this hot July day. As I bring my canoe sideways to the trunk and climb onto it, a large snake slips off the tree into the narrow, blackwater creek. I do not get a close look but know it is no moccasin because it yielded too easily. I pull my canoe's bow up onto the trunk past the hull's center, and let it slide back into the downstream flow. Since leaving Whipping Creek Lake, fallen trees have slowed us to a crawl.

We are moving again, but after a few more turns and minutes of paddling, a big tangle of downed trees stops us again. Should we continue or abort? My map shows three more miles to the mouth of Whipping Creek at the Alligator River, where we plan to turn around and retrace our route upstream. Every obstacle we overcome going forward will have to be faced again on our return. If only we knew what lay ahead, it would be easy to decide. Pete Peterson and I take a lunch break confined to our canoes because swampy banks offer no ground for stretching our legs.

Before our food is even unwrapped, the choice is made for us by swarms of deer flies. I have experienced them before on paddling trips but never like this. We are in full retreat, and the attacking flies are delighted, as we have to stop to pull back over trees we previously dragged over on our way in. Reaching the lake, we paddle hard in open water but lose strokes slapping at the assailants.

For the next two miles, I paddle, slap, and think about the whipping we have been dealt. Biting flies and logjams must have a purpose—to protect nature's gems from being overrun by tourists?

My interest in exploring Whipping Creek began a few years earlier while I was canoe camping the Roanoke River and took a shortcut into Devil's Gut. At the confluence with Gardner Creek, I met Russell Lee steering a small motorboat loaded with a canoe. Russell, a longtime paddler and hunter from Plymouth, uses his canoe when hunting to get into sloughs. As he regaled me with stories about small creeks he enjoys, I thought about opportunities to explore new streams in eastern North Carolina.

Months later, Russell led me down Conoho Creek, a tributary of the Roanoke River. As he pointed out his old, primitive hunting camps from his youth, conversation turned to our favor-

ite streams. He grinned and said I should see Whipping Creek in the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge and Dare County Bombing Range. The seed of a new adventure was planted.

The Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1984, is 152,000 acres lying on the mainland portions of Dare and Hyde Counties, a twenty-mile drive from Manteo. It is a peninsula about twenty-eight miles north to south and fifteen miles east to west bordered on the west by the Alligator River (Intracoastal Waterway), on the north by Albemarle Sound, on the east by Croatan and Pamlico Sounds, and on the south by Long Shoal River and corporate farmland. US 64 passes through the northern part of the refuge, and US 264 passes through the southern part.

The wild refuge land is mainly low pocosin, peat bogs, and swamp forest. Pocosin is an Algonquin Indian word for "swamp on a hill," describing dense evergreen shrub bogs that develop over deep wet layers of peat. The swamp forests consist mostly of loblolly pine, pond pine, and Atlantic white cedar (juniper).

Before the refuge was established, the history of operating a business in this impenetrable area is a story of difficulty. In 1885, Buffalo City was built just off present-day US 64 to log cedar and cypress. The raucous boomtown grew to be Dare County's largest with a population of 3,000. Barges landed at docks on Milltail Creek to load logs hauled in on short railroad spurs. After Prohibition in 1920, moonshine production supplied most income. When liquor became legal in 1933, the bootleg boom ended, and timber had been depleted. Buffalo City began its fade back into nature. Today only pilings from old docks and a few collapsed buildings remain.

In the 1970s, First Colony Farms bought 376,000 acres in Washington, Tyrrell, Hyde, and Dare counties. Large-scale agriculture here was expensive and difficult. Development of the land was hampered by wetland regulations and environmental impact studies. The development failed, and the land was sold or traded.

One tract in Dare County was acquired for a bombing range. Another large tract in Dare and Tyrrell counties was acquired by Prudential Insurance and eventually formed the basis for the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. Some land was sold, and a remnant of about 100,000 acres formed the basis for Pocosin Lakes Na-

tional Wildlife Refuge. From 1980 to 1984, The Nature Conservancy arranged a gift from Prudential Insurance Company of 118,000 acres and purchased 25,000 acres of adjacent land. At the time, the Prudential donation was valued at more than \$50 million and was the largest conservation gift in history.

The refuge is open to public use year-round during daylight and draws about 42,000 visitors annually. All canals, creeks, and lakes located in areas open to the public are open to fishing during state seasons. Hunting is allowed during state seasons and a refuge permit is required. Most hunting is for deer, but squirrels, rabbits, quail, and mourning doves are also taken.

Wildlife observation in the refuge is popular. It has one of the largest black bear populations on the eastern seaboard. During the summer, the refuge offers a guided "Sunset Tour" beginning at the Creef Cut Trailhead on US 64. Participants receive an orientation to the refuge and its management programs, a walk along Creef Cut Trail, and an opportunity to drive along the refuge farm field roads to see black bears, owls, and other wildlife. Visitors driving along Milltail Road near sunset frequently see bear.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service declared red wolves (*Canis rufus*) extinct in the wild in 1980. In 1987 enough red wolves were bred in captivity to begin a restoration program on the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. Visitors are unlikely to ever see a red wolf, but they might get a chance to hear one. The refuge staff organizes "Howling Safaris" during some evenings.

Much of the refuge land is relatively inaccessible, but there are two walking trails. Sandy Ridge Wildlife Trail, a half-mile trail including a 2,300-foot boardwalk, leads through a cypress swamp habitat. Creef Cut Trail, a half-mile paved trail, winds between a freshwater marsh and wetlands. It is an easy walk with pretty views and points for watching wildlife. Both trails are handicapped accessible.

Milltail Creek is in the northern part of the refuge. Canoes, kayaks, or small motorboats may be used on its four color-coded water trails. All trails can be started from a launch only two miles off US 64 at the south end of Buffalo City Road. It is only a few miles to paddle into Sawyer Lake to view one of the last remaining large stands of Atlantic white cedar trees. Another trail leads to the mouth of Milltail Creek at the Alligator River.

Whipping Creek is south of Milltail creek, but it actually begins in the Dare County Bombing Range in the middle of and surrounded by the southern part of the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. The range, owned by the US Air Force, is used to practice evasive maneuvers in electronic warfare, fire at targets, or drop simulated bombs. The range is also part of the NC Gamelands Program and governed by Gamelands rules and regulations. The headwaters of Whipping Creek and most of Whipping Creek Lake are within the range. The southern part of the lake leaves the range and becomes part of the refuge as Whipping Creek heads toward the wide Alligator River.

Since my downed tree and deer fly debacle on Whipping Creek, I vowed to return. I would take my chances with the flies but not with dragging over countless tree trunks. I checked often with refuge headquarters to see if there were any plans to make Whipping Creek navigable. The answer was it was low priority. Checking periodically over the next two years, there was no progress. I had almost given up but made a last call. It was a big surprise to hear the channel had been recently cleared. I quickly planned a September trip to explore it before big storms could undo the work.

Pete and I turn off US 64 with two solo canoes strapped to his truck. From US 64, Whipping Creek is only ten crow-miles to the south, but it is a forty-five minute drive. It begins as two lanes and easy driving. I look at my map and check distances as we turn. Many road signs are missing or damaged since our last visit. Gouges left on the sign's splintered wood are unmistakable marks of bear claws. At the next one-lane sandy drive, four black bear cross into the dense woods a few hundred feet ahead.

A mile before reaching the small bridge over Whipping Creek there is an ominous metal sign on Dry Ridge Road: "WARNING—U.S. Air Force installation—It is unlawful to enter this area without permission of the Installation Commander. While on this Installation all personnel and the property under their control are subject to search." It is not as restrictive as it sounds. Entry is rarely prohibited and only when a gate, a quarter-mile ahead, is closed. Gate status can be checked before traveling by calling 252-473-5589.

I have yet to pass another vehicle driving to Whipping Creek. Navigating the lonely roads makes one think about the problems of a stuck or disabled vehicle. It could be a long and confusing

journey for a tow truck. Having a second vehicle or a bicycle would offer backup transportation to civilization.

We stop about two hundred yards before reaching the bridge over Whipping Creek because knee-high water covers the sandy one-lane road. We unload our canoes and wade and paddle to the bridge. Pete spots wolf tracks in the sand near the bridge.

We plan to paddle to the creek's mouth at the Alligator River, and then return for a total of ten miles. Whipping Creek is narrow at the bridge, and its blackwater flows under a dense tree canopy. I bump over a few logs near the surface and force my canoe through short stretches where aquatic weeds have grown across the channel.

Entering the lake, we have to plug our ears to lessen a deafening roar. Just overhead, two jet fighters fly so low I think I can see the pilots. It is over as quickly as it began, and all that remain are the sounds of birds.

Whipping Creek Lake is two miles long by a half-mile wide. Cypress and tupelo-gum trees are along the shore, with great blue heron and anhinga nests in many of the trees. The NC Division of Water Quality classifies Whipping Creek as Outstanding Resource Waters. In hot weather, the pristine lake is a tempting place for a swim, but alligators are common.

Where the creek resumes at the lake's exit, we begin to see the chain-sawn trunks that blocked our last trip. Aquatic weeds grow from the swampy banks and in some areas almost block the channel, but our progress is never stopped. We reach the mouth of Whipping Creek, eat lunch, and stare across the three-mile wide Alligator River. It is an outstanding September afternoon to enjoy this remote place and smile about memories of logjams and deer flies.

It is possible to boat across the Alligator River to reach the mouth of Whipping Creek. The closest point is from Grapevine Landing, an informal access, but the wide expanse of open water makes the crossing only suitable for those with equipment and experience to cope with large waves whipped up by wind.

Driving to Whipping Creek from US 264 appears to be a shorter way in, but someone who works on the range said that he would not take his truck on this route.

For those who want to explore blackwater in the refuge without some of the difficulties of Whipping Creek, try Milltail Creek. It is only minutes off US 64, has an easy access, and marked paddling trails.

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