ISLANDS

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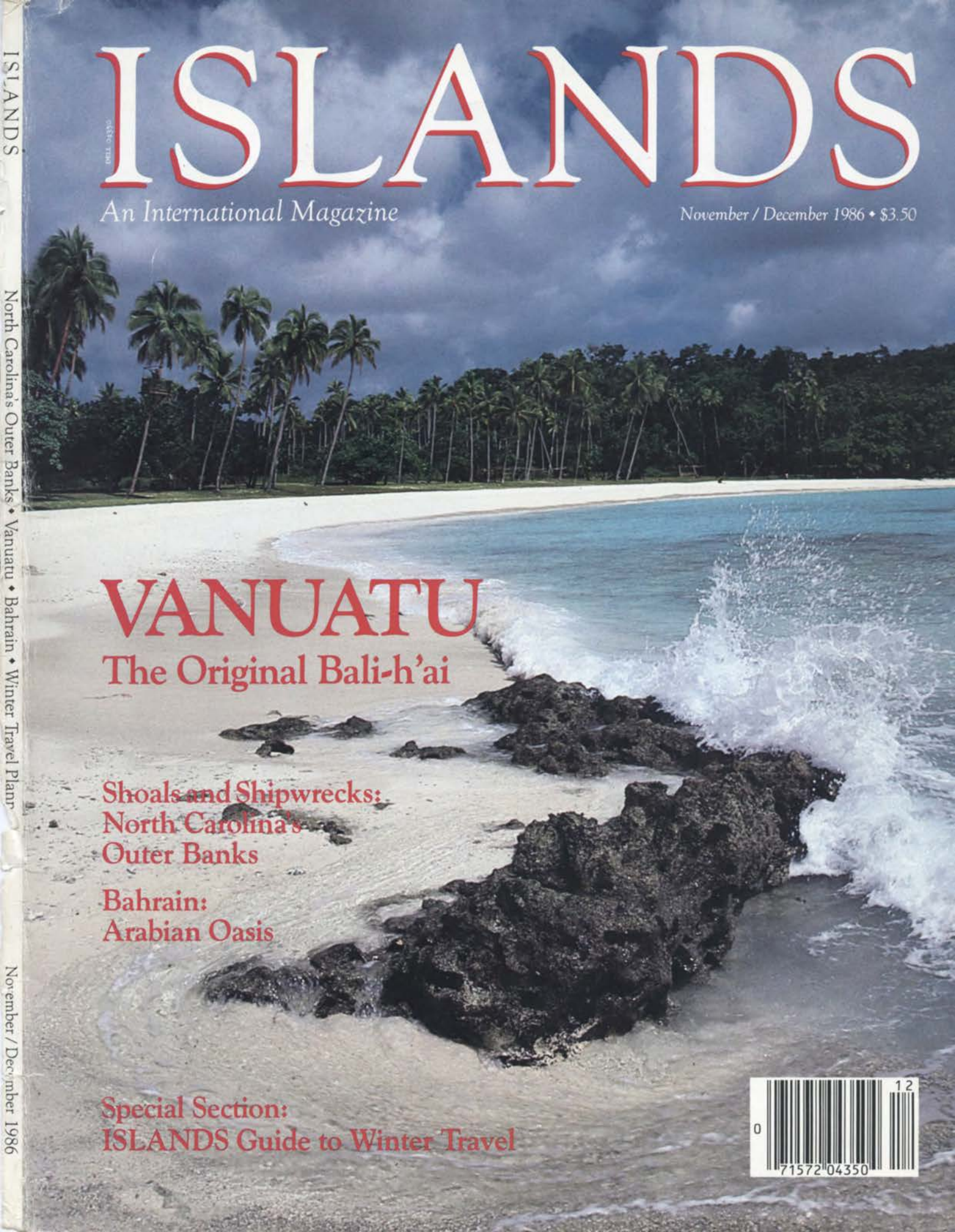

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Shoals and Shipwrecks:
North Carolina's
Outer Banks

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Shoals and Shipwrecks:

North Carolina's Outer Banks

By Susan Mazur
Photographs by Bob Krist

IT WAS SLIGHTLY more than 400 years ago that Sir Walter Raleigh, attempting to establish the first English colony in the New World, began sending expeditions to Roanoke Island. The site chosen by Raleigh is now known as one of the "Outer Banks," a series of sand spits and barrier islands located off the North Carolina coast. Several years after the Roanoke colony got underway, however, it mysteriously disappeared. "The popular belief," jokes Outer Banks historian David Stick, "is that the lost colony was carried off by the fierce Carolina mosquitoes."

The Banks attracted additional attention with the success of the Wright brothers' flight near Kitty Hawk, the development of the seaside resort of Nags Head, and the onslaught of hurricanes Agnes, Camille and Diane, which brewed round Cape Hatteras and devastated the northeast. Today the Outer Banks are perhaps best known as the home of the heavily developed Cape Hatteras National Seashore, where a busy highway runs neck-and-neck with sea-oat dunes, and shopping malls, dusty-shingled condominiums and fast-food chains are scrawled like graffiti in the sand.

What remains a well-kept secret is that there is *another* Outer Banks, one that is completely wild, one that is, in fact, the last primitive coastline left in the East. Still accessible only by boat (you take two or three ferries to get there), it was a haven for pirates in earlier centuries and is now the haunt of endangered breeds, such as the wild mustang, loggerhead turtle—and assorted human adventurers. There are no roads or provisions on Core Banks and Shackleford Banks, the two main links in the 55-mile chain of barrier islands that comprise Cape Lookout National Seashore. Any settlements that may have existed on the banks have long been abandoned.

Satellite photos of the Outer Banks reveal a membranelike series of sandbars and inlets stretching 175 miles from Virginia to Cape Lookout. Midway, Cape Hatteras juts out into the Atlantic with 30-mile-wide Pamlico Sound in between. So vulnerable is the 74-mile wilderness between Hatteras and Cape Lookout that the Navy protects it from the north at Hatteras, while the Marines play war games around Cape Lookout at Atlantic, Cherry Point and Camp Lejeune. A drive across adjacent Cedar Island provides close encounters with diving fighter planes crashing the silence of the marsh.

"Americans don't realize that World War II came to within 25 miles of our shore," says Roderick Farb, author of *Shipwrecks: Diving the Graveyard of the Atlantic*, a guide to wreck-diving in the Outer Banks. In it he identifies two submerged U-boats as well as a dozen or so German submarines that prowled the Banks in the 1940s, torpedoing Allied ships.

The scenery begins looking noticeably different at Cape Hatteras. Here the Continental Shelf drops off 16,000 feet into the Hatteras Abyss, where ordinary seashells petrify to three times their normal size or are pulverized by currents and recycled as slabs of primordial cement before being heaved back onto shore. Here the cold Labrador Current collides with the Gulf Stream, a tempestuous meeting and site of some of history's worst storms and shipwrecks. (There are two celebrations aboard cruise ships bound from New York to South America—one of jubilance at crossing the equator, the other of relief after turbulent Hatteras.)

This phenomenal year-round mix of cold and tropical waters also draws legions of saltwater fishermen. Men, women and children arrive in vans, lining up along the sandy point and laying claim to their own few square feet of shore. With 15-foot rods anchored, they then await the blitz of bass, trout, flounder, pompano, mullet and shark. Offshore, small craft track the big ones—king mackerel, swordfish, tuna, blue marlin. The brown pelican, whose existence is precarious elsewhere, thrives in this fish-

rich habitat.

Hatteras is a transition zone that was further defined by the hurricane of September, 1846, which swashed out the inlet that now separates Hatteras Island from the island of Ocracoke. At Hatteras Village, near the southern tip of the island, the vegetation suddenly becomes tropical, a trend that continues across to Ocracoke Island and down through Gulf Stream-fed Cape Lookout. Yucca, yaupon tea bushes, mimosa blossoms and gardenias are among the unexpected plants that appear.

North Carolina passed a law in 1715 encouraging boat pilots to settle at Ocracoke Inlet at the southern tip of the island to guide ships traveling with goods through the shoal-ridden channel to Portsmouth Village, then the largest port in the colony. The precarious waters of the inlet also appealed to one Edward Teach, popularly known as Blackbeard, who recognized the inlet as an ideal venue for his business—picking off imperiled cargo ships. One of the first acts in setting up his "business" was to change the name of "Pilot Town" to something snappier. Seeing the 16-mile stretch of white sand he cried, "Oh, crow cock!" Hence, forevermore, Ocracoke.

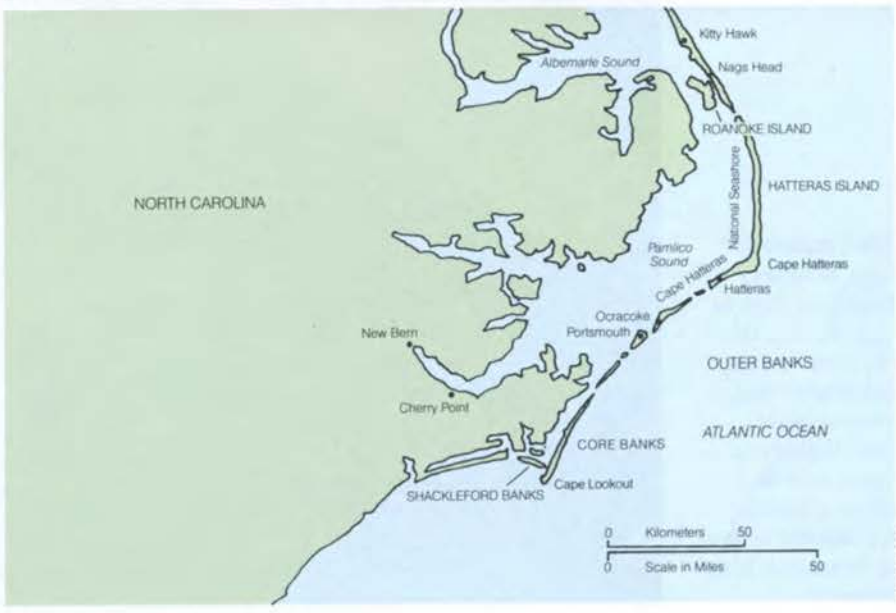
From 1716 to 1718 this merchant-seaman-turned-pirate headquartered in a cove on the north side of the inlet, sheltered by tall live oak trees, and from there raided the entire Atlantic Coast, aided by 400 men and a fleet of four ships. In battle, with chest bared and beard braided with colored ribbons, he'd set slow-burning matches smoldering under his hat and scare the wits out of his captives before actually killing them—thus gaining a reputation as the devil incarnate.

Eventually Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia got fed up with the outlaw's exploits (North Carolina's governor was in collusion) and had him beheaded by the Royal Navy at Ocracoke Inlet in 1718. Not only did knowledge of the whereabouts of his buried treasure die with him (the devil was the only other who knew where it was, he said, and "the longest liver should take all"), but legend has it that his head swam seven times around the British ship after being plucked from the bowsprit and thrown into the water.

Ocracoke Island today resembles the frontier barrier reefs of Cape Lookout; you can become lost in the dunes and humbled by the stillness. There are private beaches for clamming, bird-watching, swimming, surfing, boogie boarding, diving and dreaming. But Highway 12 does run across the island, dead-ending at Ocracoke Village,

A ferry approaches Silver Lake, the harbor area on Ocracoke Island (opposite). Painter Ralph Smith paints the Chicamacomico Life Saving Station on Hatteras Island (left), one of seven built along the Outer Banks in an effort to rescue victims of shipwrecks.

OUTER BANKS



a quaint town of colonial cottages, picket fences, dirt roads and a population of 660. It is the last settlement before Core Banks.

Residents of Ocracoke Village are mostly descendants of merchants from Devon, although locals speculate that some of them may have descended from the piratical followers of Teach, who sailed from Bristol. They are a strawberry-blond-haired people who still speak with a kind of English accent, albeit one that has developed its own idiosyncracies over 200 years of isolation. Only in 1960 did the ferry run begin between Hatteras and Ocracoke.

Another peculiarity is the annual Ocracoke crab fest. Driving off the ferry into the village on May 4, you might think you've encountered some kind of cult—that of *Callinectes sapidus*—the blue crab. Ocracoke's shallow, sandy waters are full of them. Late April, early May, the blue crab becomes a soft-shell delicacy and the entire town turns out to celebrate the molt.

Two tons of crab are cooked and chilled, and it's all the slaw and crab you can eat for $3. There is a 10-kilometer crab race around the village, and the day culminates with the selection of a "crab princess." Crab lovers, whose heads are buried for hours as they devour mountains of the orange crustacean, suddenly regain consciousness in time for the coronation.

The princess is chosen from a group of 12 contestants who pin up their photos in Ocracoke's general store over a row of individual pickle jars a few weeks before the fest. In true democratic fashion, the winner is the one whose jar gets stuffed with the most money.

Crab festivities spill over the lawn of retired Air Force Colonel Wes Egan and his wife Ruth, who live just opposite the Cedar Island Ferry that takes you across Pamlico Sound toward Cape Lookout. His three and one-half acres of wooded land are the site of a mansion-turned-hotel built by Sam Jones, a Virginia industrialist who built homes on Ocracoke suitable for opulent parties. A 16-window gable sits atop the hotel, panelled inside with fir, juniper and cypress timber that floated ashore from ships wrecked on the Banks 125 years ago.

"Better cover up your arms and head," Colonel Egan advises as we prepare to make the trip to Portsmouth. Outfitted in his "invincible green" flight suit, he presents a convincing case for the need to pack insect repellent. "Mrs. Egan and I have not been there for at least 10 years," he announces, "but I understand the greenheads and mosquitoes are biting about the same."

Portsmouth, the first town planned by the Colonial Assembly in 1753 and for a long time the largest settlement in North Carolina, is a ghost town now. The 50-acre site boasts 18 wooden pastel-colored houses, one Methodist church and a cemetery with tombstones straight out of a Sears-Roebuck catalog. Surrounding the homes are manicured lawns, courtesy of diligent park rangers; in back of the homes are screened "cool houses" that once kept milk and cheese fresh. Why, I wondered aloud, was this town abandoned?

"Take a switch of this myrtle bush," replies Junius Austin who, with his son Rudy, runs the private ferry from Ocracoke to Portsmouth. No further explanation is needed. Right there, 50 feet inland from the Portsmouth dock, before anyone can say Chicamacomico Inlet, a swarm of greenheads rises up like a deadly vapor and attacks for no reason at all. Forget the myrtle switch, hats, hoods, insect repellent. Even Colonel Egan's flight suit is no match for these man-eaters! The only course of action is to run to the main house for shelter.

Why was Portsmouth abandoned? Some swear that it was because of the insects—hardy descendants, no doubt, of the ones that did away with the Raleigh colony. If anyone knows, it's Junius Austin, whose family goes back to the original Ocracoke boat pilots.

"My father," he says with a thick Outer Banks / Elizabethan accent, "was in the lighthouse service on Ocracoke, and I was a hunting and fishing guide on Portsmouth for 18 years. Portsmouth was a haulover point in the 1800s for two-thirds of all North Carolina's trade, but now the channel's about two feet deep most places. Never know where the next shoal is—just keeps shifting. The way over to Portsmouth's never the same on the way back."

Goods came as far as Ocracoke Inlet, Austin explains, and were lightered to small boats for storage at Portsmouth warehouses until they could be taken inland to New Bern, then the capital. Prior to the shoaling up of Wallace Inlet and the opening of Hatteras Inlet, Portsmouth's white population peaked at 581. (The town also supported a fluctuating slave population.) There was one church, a tavern, post office, hospital and shipbuilding facilities. But when the Civil War broke out, all residents fled except for one woman.

"She was a rather fat woman and couldn't fit through the door, they say," Park Ranger Dick Williams relates with a smile. "Though she later reported having been treated rather well by the Yankees."

Afterward Portsmouth enjoyed limited success as a health resort, as mainlanders summered there in the belief that the consumption of saltwater fish prevented malaria. But the town never regained its prominence as a port, and gradually the population dwindled until the last resident—Henry Pigott, the son of a slave—died in 1971.

Portsmouth Island, as Core Banks north of Drum Inlet is called, runs 20 miles north to south and is a mirror image of Core Banks south. Together with Shackleford Banks, which angles east to west and is nine miles long, they form a check-mark configuration, with the widest area—two miles across—at Portsmouth Village.

East of the ghost town, Portsmouth's beach begins, but where it ends is debatable. It's a mirage, this tidal flat, with sand, sky and sea running all together and the sun hot with special effects. Was that a zebra-striped bush plane landing by the abandoned coast guard station, or was it some kind of vagrant bird? And how did these fishermen get here in RVs, on this, a completely roadless barrier island with no bridge to the mainland?

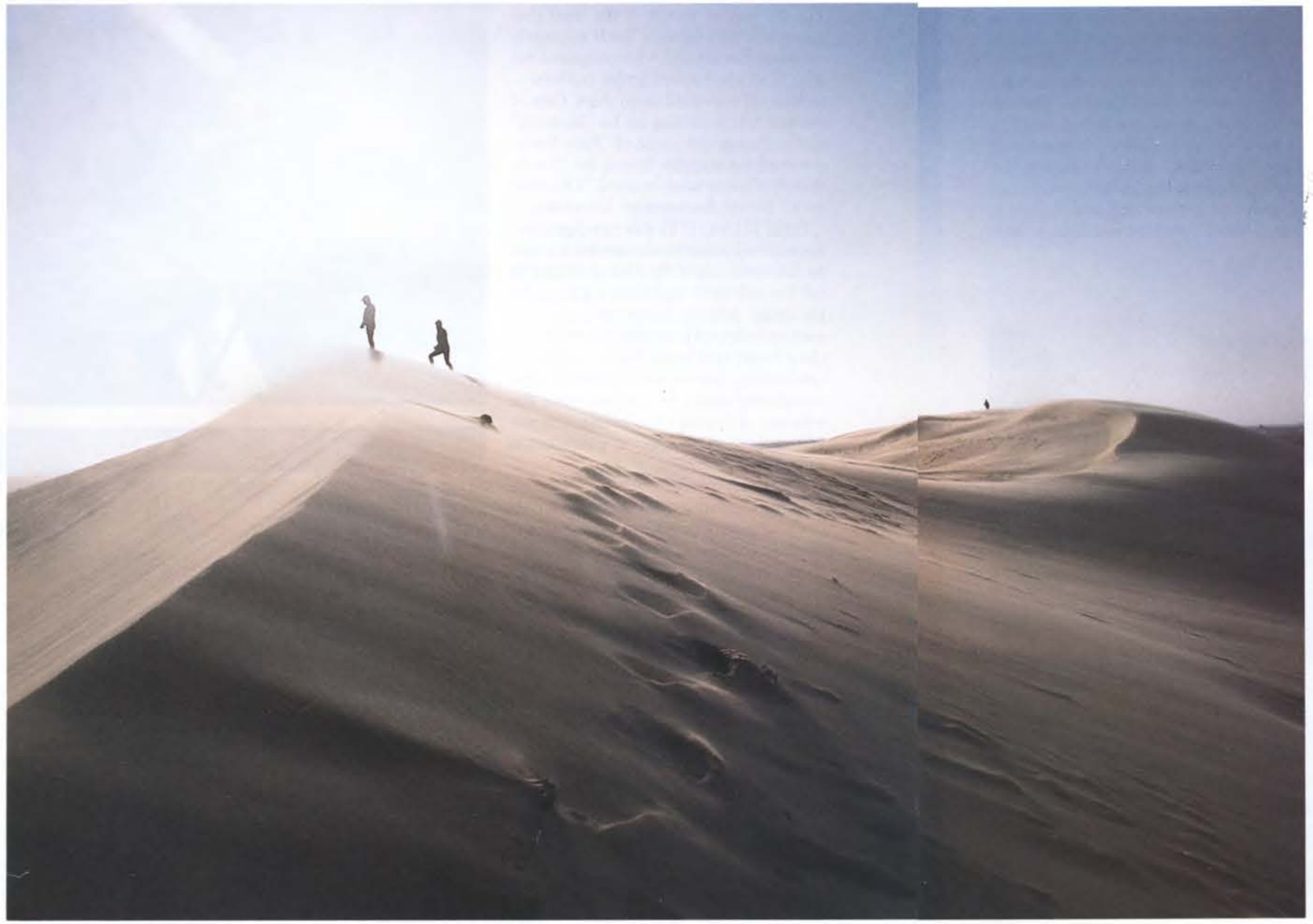
"Jim."

"Yeah, Skip."

"Got any film left in your Polaroid?"

"No, what's up?"

"Tide's gone out farther than I've ever seen it. You can walk 75 feet out to the buoy. The boat you just came in on from



Hikers explore the dunes at Jockey's Ridge State Park in Nag's Head (right). The dunes are the highest and most extensive in the East. Neglect and Nature take their toll on a building in a deserted village on Portsmouth Island (opposite).

Harkers [Island] is sitting on dry land."

Park Ranger Jim Godwin is doing a routine storm inspection along Core Banks south beach when he receives this radio call from Skip Prange at Cape Lookout headquarters, near the lighthouse. Heavy rains smash against the windshield of his four-wheel-drive vehicle.

"Here at Cape Lookout, the wind often controls the tides more than the cycle," says Godwin, who after only a short time at Core Banks seems remarkably knowledgeable about even the minutest detail, right down to the coordinates of the poison ivy in the woods at Guthrie's Hammock.

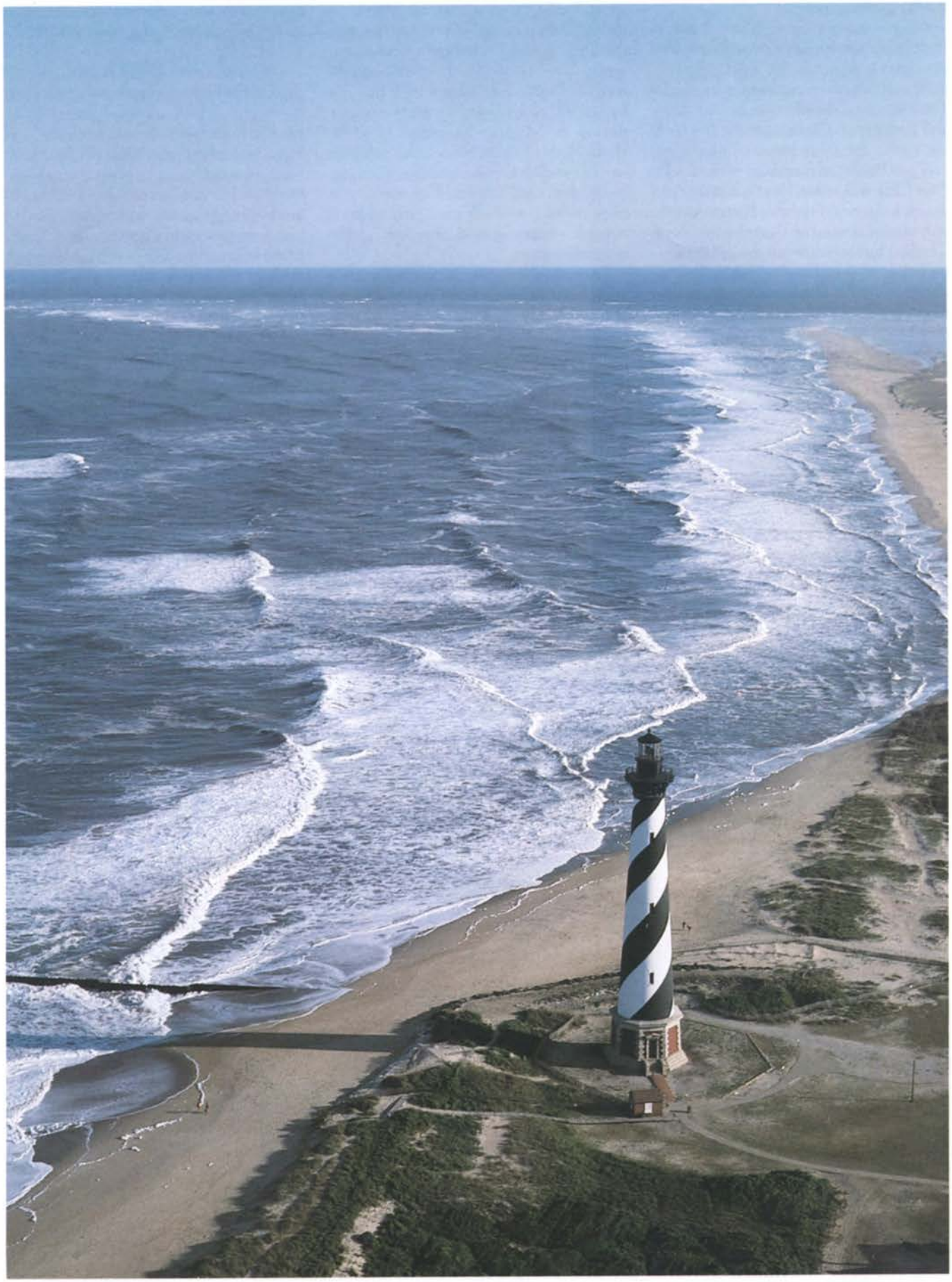
But Godwin has another agenda. First, he must locate a fisherman to inform him that his grandmother has just died. Then, he will check the beach for any human and animal casualties of the storm, making sure not to run over posted loggerhead turtle nests while searching the berms and dunes. If he encounters any violators, he will inform them of the seashore's few rules, the most stringent being a ban on junking cars in the dunes.

In his attempt to locate the fisherman he passes two vans heading for the lighthouse. (The vans and RVs on Core Banks, Godwin explains, have two access points on the mainland. You can ferry across to North New Drum Inlet from Atlantic or Shingle Point from Davis.) Neither van carries the fisherman he's looking for, but one person has seen him camped not far away. Godwin finds him, delivers the news and continues up the beach past skimmers, plovers and oystercatchers feeding in the surf.

The casualty count is taken: one dead stingray; one dead loon (illegally shot by a fisherman); and one marooned kayaker from Beaufort looking for a ride back to the mainland.

The assortment of rusted cars you see along the way, according to Godwin, was junked here, many of them before the federal government acquired the park from the state of North Carolina. The park is proceeding to pile as much of the scrap as possible and is airlifting it from Drum Inlet. "We're also," declares Godwin, "removing these tar shacks fishermen put up illegally and are opening new shelters at North New Drum Inlet and Shingle Point

Pelicans come home to roost on Beacon Island (above). Traditionally, the Banks have been kinder to wildlife than to humans. Many sailors met their deaths in the waters off Cape Hatteras (opposite); many homes, like this one on Portsmouth, stand abandoned (right).



for the public's use."

As you wander through the dunes of these washover islands, an occasional feral cat, grown huge in the wild, appears, lending its uncanny presence to a territory also frequented by raccoon, nutria, shrew and a variety of other mammals. But birds are by far the most important creatures on Core Banks, as members of the Rod & Gun Club will attest. Headquartered at a simple lodge near Guthrie's Hammock (the only maritime forest on Core Banks), North Carolina hunters carry on the gentleman's tradition of the shooting party, finding an abundance of pheasant, duck and mourning dove in the scrub savannah and marshes.

The most primitive of all the islands in the seashore is the recently acquired Shackleford Banks, just across Barden Inlet from the lighthouse. Shackleford was home to the 19th-century whaling town of Diamond City (named for the diamond pattern on Lookout's lighthouse), but the banks' 500 people were forced to evacuate during the August hurricane of 1899. Brought to Harkers Island, the refugees went to work in the shipbuilding business. No evidence of Diamond City remains on Shackleford, aside from herds of feral animals—mustang, cows, sheep and rather aggressive goats.

Plans are to keep Shackleford completely wild; no vehicles or buildings will be allowed. The entire island was once heavily forested with cedar, but in the early 1900s dune migration, coupled with a rising sea, buried the woodlands so that today you find marsh with cedar stumps and cedar ghost forests emerging from under the dunes.

The ocean side of Shackleford is particularly spectacular, with an undulating landscape of 35-foot sea-oat dunes. "It's a hit with nude sunbathers in summer," says Mrs. Jim Reeves who, with her husband, runs the single most important establishment on Harkers Island—the Harkers Island Fishing Center, with motel, marina and ferry service to Cape Lookout. To get to these lunarlike dunes you cut through thickets of live oak draped with Spanish moss, yaupon and vines from the beach side of Shackleford.

The island is a wonderland. Visitors can track horses, study the prima donna Louisiana heron as she primps in the water,

watch osprey feed their young, poke sticks at tiny dead sharks washed ashore and marvel at wading birds sporting tremendously long legs and bills—all without intrusion.

But the real adventure at Cape Lookout, according to wreck diver Farb, lies in the underwater world that "is as important as the terrestrial wilderness of the Smoky Mountains or Yellowstone. The corals, sponges and game fish here are the same as in the Caribbean."

While the Outer Banks are rich in natural treasures, they may also be full of man-made ones. Just ask treasure hunter Alan Riebe. The only serious treasure hunter in the Outer Banks, Riebe is based in nearby Beaufort. His quest is to find the *El Salvador*, a Spanish galleon that went down off Beaufort Inlet in the hurricane of August, 1750. Bound from Havana to Spain, the ship was carrying $104 million in registered Spanish pesetas.

Many see Riebe as a modern-day Don Quixote, particularly other professional salvors who, undoubtedly, envy his persistence. But Riebe just smiled when Mel Fisher, who has a 20 percent investment in Riebe's company, discovered the main hold of the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* off Key West a couple of summers ago. Inside it, Fisher found a fortune in gold, silver and jewels.

Using Fisher's technology and aided by his key researcher and magnetometer expert, Riebe predicts that he will find the *El Salvador* within the next year or two. He has already won one major battle in his quest—the fight to retain the federal admiralty law—which, if changed, would have restricted private exploration and salvage operations in North Carolina and left him out of the running for the treasure. Salvors are entitled by admiralty law to 75 percent of a find.

"I've paid my dues," says Riebe. "I've made hundreds and hundreds of dives alone using a hand-held proton magnetometer; risked going to jail; had my boat sabotaged; spent $150,000 of my own, my wife Rosalie's and investors' money. . . . " My whole life, my whole rainbow is tied up in that one purpose. I have lived for only one reason—to find that shipwreck."

Will Alan Riebe realize his dream? With "an ancient buckler, a skinny nag and a greyhound for the chase," will Riebe be next in line to discover a king's ransom in a wilderness that has largely vanished from the rest of the world?

Susan Mazur, a free-lance writer, lives in New York City.

The sea dominates life on the Banks, where surf fishing is the most popular activity (opposite), crabbing provides a living for a good number of locals (left) and rows of vacation homes enjoy ocean-front views while risking the wrath of wayward waves (below).