

OUR

Lost in Carolina

EVERY FEW YEARS A HURRICANE RESHUFFLES THE COAST OFF CAPE FEAR. CARTOGRAPHY'S LOSS IS KAYAKING'S GAIN. BY LOLLY MERRELL

"Well, this is gone," said Chris Hoskins, pointing at a blue line on our topo map. "There's an island there now." My husband, David, and I had stopped in Carolina Beach, North Carolina, for gear and advice before setting out on a three-day kayak expedition near Cape Fear. Hoskins, a guide at Kayak Carolina, crossed out marshes, filled in inlets, and penciled in sandbars, scribbling faster than an art-fair caricaturist. "And there's Billy Goat Island," he said finally, circling a small blob, suspended in the middle of the Cape Fear River.

The doctored map was yet another casualty of Hurricane Fran, which struck Cape Fear in 1996 with 110-mile-an-hour winds and summoned a 12-foot-high surge of seawater that shuffled the salt-marsh islands. Severe



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AMERICAN WILDS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IMKE LASS



OFF THE CHART: The huge storms that hit North Carolina's southern coast move entire islands and waterways, making route-finding a challenge. Opposite: Beached on Masonboro Island.

storms hit this coast about every four years, earning it the name Hurricane Alley. But the weather also creates a great reason to navigate a sea kayak here: not for the thrill of getting caught in a Fran, Floyd, Bonnie, or Bertha—hurricane warnings come nearly a week in advance—but because each storm drastically transforms the marine landscape, producing a new maze of paddling trails.

Our plan called for a leisurely 25-mile paddle in two kayaks, from Cape Fear to Wrightsville Beach, through a weave of inlets, estuaries, wooded islands, and tidal flats. Leisurely, but not simple. "According to this," David said, holding up his GPS as we steadied our boats next to a hairlike tuft of tidal grass on the southern bank of the Cape Fear River, only a few hours into our journey, "we've gone two miles too far." Behind us, veins of marsh islands rose from the silver water of Bald Head Island's 10,000-acre wildlife preserve, while four dolphins arched and spouted ten feet from my bow. "We also missed three turns," he added. I had looked forward to getting lost in this lovely mess of wilderness, just not so soon.

"Look, there's the Rocks!" David shouted suddenly. Between us and the Atlantic a rugged seawall rose out of the water. Built nearly 130 years ago, the Rocks is a four-mile-long stone barricade, constructed to close a hurricane-cut inlet (and, locals say, as a barrier against invading Yankees) and one of the few permanent landmarks on our map. We tied to an old mooring, sat on the hot stones, and faced the sea. I spread out Hoskins's reconfigured map to retrace our path. Soon we were back on our way.

There is an easier route through the peripatetic Carolina coast, the Intracoastal Waterway, but it's a lousy place to paddle, crowded with ski boats and industrial shipping ports. By contrast, the flood-prone vulnerability of the lower islands and tidal flats has warded off development, and the constant



BLUE-WATER DAYS: Paddling the Cape Fear River (above). Below right: Camping at Carolina Beach State Park. Bottom: Landfall on Bald Head Island.

wash of sandy storm water has kept the estuaries so shallow that only kayaks, canoes, and johnboats can navigate them. Industrious paddlers can feasibly glide in pristine wilderness all the way from Cape Hatteras to Cape Fear without once hearing a two-stroke engine.

The hardest part is getting in. The entrances to these trails are typically hidden by dark cypress canopies, barricaded by shallow acres of oyster beds, or obscured by high swamp grass. I was lucky to know a small segment of paddling routes near the Neuse River in the central coast, where I spent my summers as a kid, but trailhead locations were always privileged information, known mostly to local fishermen. The problem was solved a few years ago, when a coastal conservation coalition led by North Carolina State University published a map connecting nearly 2,000 miles of semi-permanent routes throughout the coastal Carolina plain.

Once back on course, the first two days were solitary bliss: by day, paddling past empty white beaches; by night, pulling into wild sound islands dotted with Venus flytraps—indigenous to the Carolina coast. The second afternoon, we even dropped by Billy Goat Island, which turned out to be a grassy speck of land inhabited only by the descendants of goats that were swept there during a storm a hundred years ago.

On day three, we glided into the tidal flats of Masonboro Island, an eight-mile-long estuarine preserve where camping is allowed but which few boats ever access, partly because of the unpredictable tides. On the Intracoastal Waterway side, wooded spots of islands rose out of a placid bay of wildlife-thick marsh. On the eastern, ocean-side edge, dunes crowned with sea oats marked the start of a long stretch of snowy sand



CAPE FEAR TO WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH, NORTH CAROLINA

Kayak Carolina (www.kayakcarolina.com) in Carolina Beach rents kayaks (\$55 a day), guides trips (\$66 for a four-hour Masonboro Island trip), and offers free shuttle service. The Bald Head ferry leaves Southport hourly (\$15 per person, \$15 per kayak, round-trip; www.baldheadisland.com). There's no camping on Bald Head Island, but Theodosia's Bed and Breakfast (\$225 and up; www.theodosias.com) will store your kayak. Campsites in Carolina Beach State Park are first-come, first-served (\$15 a day; www.ils.unc.edu/parkproject). Camping permits aren't needed on Masonboro Island (www.ncnerr.org). Bring plenty of drinking water—there are no facilities on the island. Get a copy of the new "North Carolina Coastal Plain Paddle Trails" map online at www.ncsu.edu/paddletrails. —L.M.



populated by endangered loggerhead turtles.

The folks at Kayak Carolina had warned us that Masonboro can only be navigated at high tide, which had long since ebbed. "It's too late," I said to David, who was nonchalantly reaching out to snag an oyster.

"We got it, no problem," David replied, breaking into a sprinting paddle. I turned

the nose of my boat toward the dunes and followed. The faint thunder of the Atlantic crashed only a few hundred yards away, but with 30 minutes left to low tide our boats soon halted in a pit of tidal mud.

This was the Carolina coast I remembered from childhood: The sun broiled our shoulders, the herons took off, and a fog of overprotective terns screeched overhead. We left the kayaks on the tallest tuft of grass and struggled to walk through the murk. A half-hour later, we lumbered onto the soft beach, ran up and over the dunes, shedding life jackets and tarred sandals, and dove into the cool sparkling curls of the Atlantic. Our campsite that night was beneath the stars, on the beach beside a driftwood fire.

The next afternoon, rain began to fall, but we decided to plow through the squall and finish our Wrightsville Beach route at a drawbridge connecting the beach to the mainland. A few weeks later Hurricane Isabel hit the Carolina coast, taking a bite out of the main highway connecting the Outer Banks and erasing a good part of our trail. I guess I'll keep our map as a souvenir. ▲

