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by Valerie Thom

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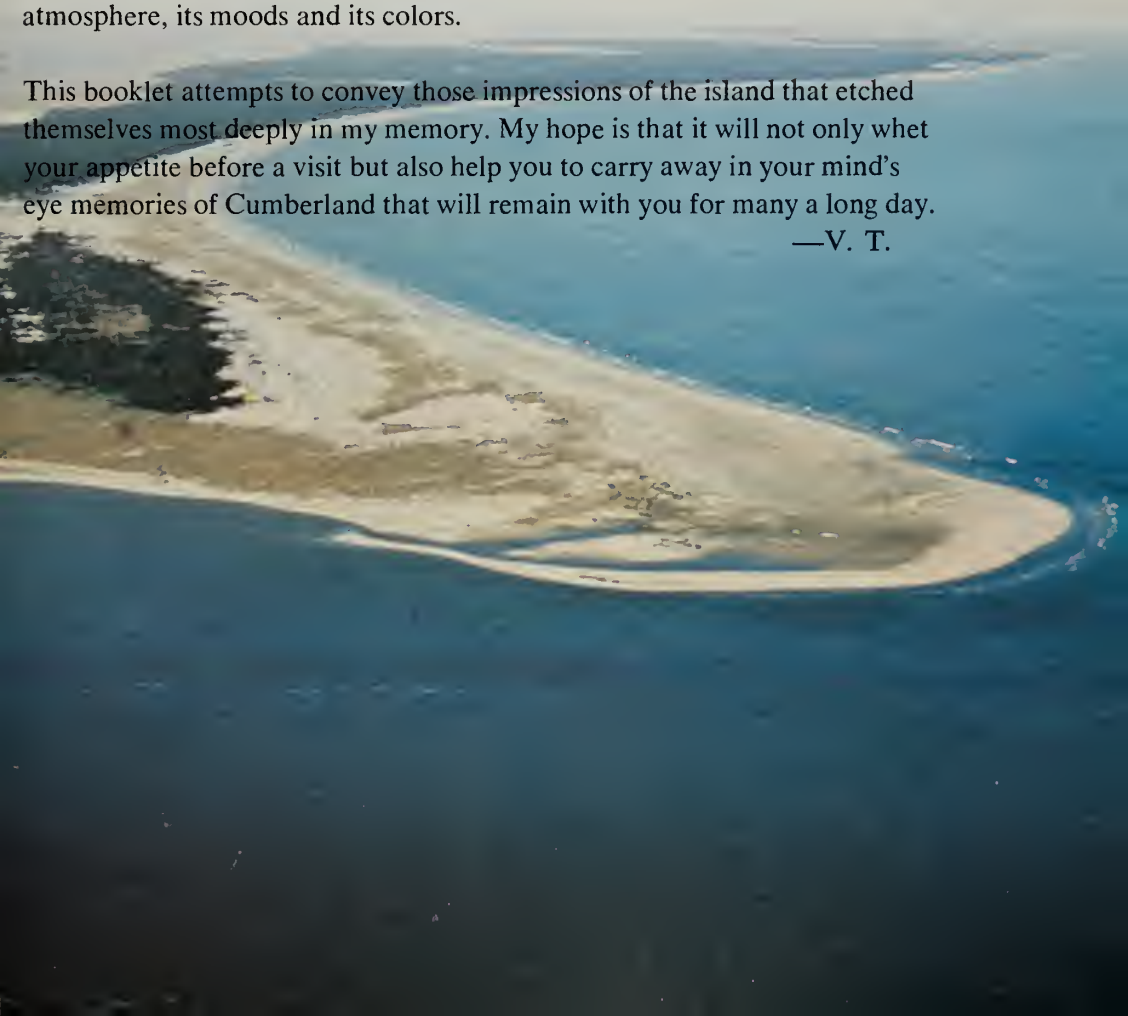


preface

When I went to Cumberland it was as a visitor not just from the mainland but from Scotland, with which the island has a surprising number of links. Everything on Cumberland was new to me and I was intrigued by both its history and its wildlife. But most of all I was captivated by the island's atmosphere, its moods and its colors.

This booklet attempts to convey those impressions of the island that etched themselves most deeply in my memory. My hope is that it will not only whet your appetite before a visit but also help you to carry away in your mind's eye memories of Cumberland that will remain with you for many a long day.

—V. T.





◁ NORTH

0 1 2 kilometers
0 .5 1 miles

cumberland island



Major Life Zones of Cumberland Island

Salt Marsh
Pages 10-13

Live Oaks, Palmettos, Pines
Pages 14-19

Beach
Pages 20-25

Dunes
Pages 26-31

Sloughs and Ponds
Pages 32-37



a place apart

Georgia's Golden Isles, blessed with beautiful beaches and steeped in history, have long been famous for their attractions. Today Cumberland Island, the most southerly jewel in the chain, is the last of the Golden Isles in more than just the geographical sense. Alone among the larger islands it remains little affected by development and so is still able to convey that truly island feeling of being apart from the rush and tumble of everyday life.

To get the best out of a visit to this National Seashore one must leave hurry and worry behind on the mainland and slow down to the tempo of island life. Here, there is time to look around and to look closely; to wonder at the island's fascinating wildlife and to ponder its checkered past.

This is a place of varied moods and ever-changing light and color. No two days are the same, so each and every visit will reveal something new and give a host of happy memories to take back to the ordinary world of the mainland.

In the early morning, a certain stillness often prevails at Cumberland. On the dunes, a lone palm tree in the mist evokes mirage-like sensations, while back at the mainland (next page) a ferry boat calmly waits for its first run of the day.





marshland—mud and mystery

It is not easy to decide exactly what gives Cumberland Island its special fascination, but the marshes, which dominate the scene as the National Park Service ferryboat winds its way out to the island, must surely be a contributing factor. Marshland fringes much of Cumberland's landward shores, buffering them from the actions of tide and current in the river, absorbing the energy of wave and wash, and slowing the water down so that its burden of silt is added to the marsh's mud. Where there is no buffering marsh the island's western shore is being eroded, with exposed roots and fallen trees showing just how actively the Cumberland River is nibbling away at the banks.

The marsh is a mysterious place, generally still and silent except for the swaying of the cordgrass in the wind, the lazy flapping of a marsh-hawk over its hunting ground, and the occasional croaking of a heron at the creek-side. Yet throughout the marshland, growth and decay and production and consumption proceed at a pace and with an economy that make this one of the most naturally fertile areas in the world. But little of this activity is visible to the naked eye and it is only at the edges of the marsh that the casual observer can glimpse the teeming life within. Here, where the plants thin out and the mud is exposed, live the fiddler crabs, which feed on decaying vegetation. Where they have excavated their holes, carrying out and depositing balls of spoil, the ground acquires a curiously granulated look. And when there are many of them busy in the mud, the sound they make is reminiscent of the slow popping of subsiding soapsuds.

Only from above can one fully appreciate the extent of the salt marsh—and its mysteriousness.



In spring and summer the fiddlers are so numerous that they form a moving carpet in front of an intruder, before vanishing suddenly into their sunken dwellings. Rather surprisingly the crabs are affected by the time of day as well as by the state of the tide, their color changing from dark to light during the period between sunset and sunrise. An attempt at camouflage, perhaps? But if so it does little good, for when the fiddlers are at their most active, on a falling tide whether by day or by night, the predators gather to take advantage of this generous food supply at the marsh's edge. Raccoons pick their way slowly over the mud, scraping out the crabs and rubbing them briskly between their forepaws before crunching them up. Some of the long-legged wading birds also move in for the feast, with willets feeding over the mud flats and herons and egrets along the creek-sides, while the more secretive rails prefer to remain, like the many smaller creatures of the marsh, hidden among the stems of the cordgrass.

Although the marsh proper contains only a few plant species, it nevertheless displays a surprising range of colors. The tawny-gold of fall and winter, seen best at dawn or dusk with a wind rippling the surface of the cordgrass, gradually turns to vivid green as the growing season reaches its height. A greater variety of plants grows at the marsh's fringe, where conditions are less harsh and the twice daily wash of salt water is of short duration. In spring and summer the turf there becomes tinged with purple and yellow as the sea lavender and sea oxeye come into flower. There is indeed much of interest and beauty to be found in and around the marshes if you take time to stop, to look, and to listen.

Common egrets patrol the edge of the salt marsh. Up close one can see crabs and periwinkles that make their homes in the mud and spartina grass.





along the live oak avenues

Stepping ashore onto Cumberland and walking into the forest is almost like entering a church. The live oaks that mantle so much of the island's interior arch overhead like cloisters and the swaying festoons of Spanish moss add an ethereal touch. This effect is especially marked on a misty morning, when the sun's rays, reaching downward through the dew, stab shafts of light between the heavy limbs of the live oaks and turn the moss from gray to silver.

Although it is hard to believe, these apparently fragile sprays of moss actually provide nesting sites for small birds such as parula warblers and painted buntings, whose bright hues bring a splash of color to the gray-green of the oak woods during the summer months. Cock cardinals diving between the trees and big sulphur-yellow butterflies floating above the paths also make color contrasts that catch the eye, but these, too, are transitory. Not so the patterns produced by some of the lichens that encrust the bark. Vivid pinks and reds, they look like spots and streaks of paint against the muted backgrounds of trunks and branches.

Other plants grow on the tree limbs, too; some, such as fungi, draw upon the wood itself for nourishment, and some use the trees for physical support, living otherwise independent lives. The Spanish moss is of the latter type, as is the little resurrection fern, which so accurately reflects recent weather conditions—shriveled and brown during dry periods, flourishing and green after rain.

Pointed palmetto fronds, tangled vines, and twisted live oaks covered with resurrection ferns present both an enticing invitation and a formidable barrier in the island's interior. Equally exciting to the eye are (next page) streams tinted by tannic acid and discoveries of a kingsnake on the ground and fungi and other plants growing on trees.







The dense roof of oak leaves and Spanish moss keeps light out and moisture in so that within the woods it is cool and dim even on the most dazzlingly bright day. Such conditions suit ferns and mosses and the shrubby palmetto, but many flowering plants need to see the sun before they can bloom and so must climb right up into the canopy. Fallen petals on the paths—the bright yellow of winter jessamine or the orange and scarlet of trumpet-vine—are often the only sign that these vines and creepers are blooming far overhead.

Sounds are subdued inside the live oak woods, damped down by leaves and moss, so that on a windless day there comes a strange feeling that one's ears are muffled with cotton. It is under conditions like these, when the normally incessant rattling of palmetto fronds is stilled, that the small sounds of the forest attract attention. A faint scratching as a lizard climbs quickly up a leaf, the distant drumming of a woodpecker, a sudden snort and patter of running feet as a party of whitetail deer hurry away—there are many such signs of the forest's inhabitants.

Some of these sound-makers, like the deer, can readily be seen by the patient watcher, especially early in the morning or at dusk, when they tend to feed at the woodland edge. Some, such as the chuck-wills-widow, advertise themselves almost too well by sound but are not at all easy to see. And some of the woods' inhabitants, such as moles and mice, are seldom either seen or heard but leave evidence of their presence in other ways. A wealth of wildlife can be found here in the forest with a little careful observation.

Intricately woven spider webs and garlands of Spanish moss symbolize the ties among various forms of life in the inner island.



between the tide lines

In contrast to the cool caverns of the live oak avenues which lead across the island, the beach is all light and space and brilliance. This is a place for freedom—to walk and run on the firm, clean sand, to wade and swim in the clear water of the Atlantic, to build sand castles, or simply to bask in the sun. And when these pastimes pall, there is endless interest to be found in searching out the treasures of the shore.

The shells immediately attract attention especially after a storm has replenished the supply. Large ones scattered thickly along the high tide line and tiny ones swishing to and fro in the shallows, they come in a multitude of shapes and colors. Among the biggest are the sturdy conchs, multicolored and knobbly outside and a smooth rich orange within; wing-shaped pen shells, dark and intricately patterned with saw-toothed ridges; and soft-shelled clams, often held upright in the sand by their widely parted valves so that they look like open mouths. Many of the smaller shells are delicately colored and banded. Some are iridescent and some so fine that they are almost transparent. And some, like the familiar, flat sand dollars, are not true shells and are so brittle that they frequently break when handled.

The moon snail shells are among the most beautiful, smoothly rounded and with a spiral pattern toward the apex that looks almost like an eye. This is the creature responsible for the strange sand rings to be found on the beach in summer. Formed close around the base of the shell, these “collars” provide protection for the snail’s eggs. Many and varied protective devices are used to

ensure survival for at least some of the eggs deposited by different creatures on or near the beach, where they are vulnerable to food-searching birds, to crabs, and to the drying effect of wind and sun. Whelk eggs come as a sort of necklace of egg sacs, and skate eggs in a purse-like container, while some crabs carry their eggs around with them, attached to the underside of their body, and loggerhead turtles bury theirs in the sand. None of these techniques is infallible, of course, and many of the eggs fall victim to the hazards of weather or predators. But enough will survive to maintain the population—unless man interferes with the balance by introducing pollution or non-native predators, or by direct destruction.

There are also plenty of other things to see on the beach besides shells. Wading birds of many kinds probe the wet sand behind the retreating waves in search of food. Some, like the busy little sanderlings, hurry ceaselessly to and fro among the great rolls of silvery spume, while others seem to alternate between spells of idle resting on the beach and displays of aerial acrobatics that delight the eye. Flashing, now light, now dark, as they wheel and turn, the flocks climb and fall, spread out and contract, in an impressive display of coordinated motion.

The clumsy-looking pelicans, too, are masters of formation flying, skimming the wave-crests and dipping into the troughs with a precision that must surely arouse the admiration of any onlooker. Pelicans may be rather strange and primitive looking but their claims in this respect are nothing compared to those of the horseshoe crab. This weird creature, believe it or not, is more closely related to spiders than to true crabs and has changed its shape hardly

Once you're over the dunes, the mild surf and open beach beckon. Here, between the tides, is a child's dreamland—a land of shells in countless colors, shapes, and sizes.





at all since its earliest fossil ancestors crawled ashore some 200 million years ago.

The heavy shell-like “roof” that protects the horseshoe crab’s entire body and limbs is a common sight along the tide line. Occasionally complete specimens lie half-buried in the sand; they are probably females that have succumbed during their annual egg-laying pilgrimage to land.

There are also some signs of man along the tide line, where the waves cast up their varied flotsam and jetsam. But Cumberland’s beach is more fortunate than most and there is little plastic litter to offend the eye.

It’s fascinating to watch light and shadows play upon terns, turnstones, and other birds common to the seacoast. In the spring, least terns lay their eggs at the upper edge of the beach.





will the wind win?

Even when the beach is wet, the sand blows along it on a windy day, in fine ankle-deep streamers. You can see how each obstacle, however small, acts as a barrier to the sand's passage. Tiny dunes build up behind every shell, feather, and wisp of seaweed, giving a demonstration in miniature of the way in which the growth of the big dunes began.

Wind, constantly working to lift and move the sand, and plants, pinning the sand down with roots and rhizomes, are opposing forces in the battle for the dunes. Where the wind is winning, the dunes are smooth pure curves of sand, gradually creeping away from the sea toward the edge of the forest. At several points along Cumberland's 29 kilometers of beach the dunes' creep is proceeding swiftly and sand is engulfing fields, trees, and even buildings.

Elsewhere the dunes are stable, anchored by a mesh of vegetation. The low hummocks nearest the sea are criss-crossed with railroad vines, pennywort, and sea oats, all creeping plants that can tolerate salt-spray and which respond to an occasional covering of fresh sand by putting on a vigorous spurt of growth. Their shoots push upwards so fast, in fact, that sand is carried with them and the new leaves emerge crowned with sparkling grains.

In the trough between the fore-dune hummocks and the high dunes further inland, where conditions are not so severe, grow bushes of beach elder and bayberry, whose seeds and fruits help to make this a good feeding ground for wildlife. Tracks in the sand record the activities of different creatures—

The dunes nearest the beach are the most precarious. If enough grasses and other plants catch hold, the dunes will trap the sand and grow larger. But a severe storm can tear down years of building in a moment. Besides moving the sand, the wind leaves its mark (previous page) on the trees along the coastline.





irregular scratches where a ghost crab has scuttled back to its burrow, big three-toed prints where wild turkeys stalked along in procession, deer slots cutting deeply into the sand, and heaps of spoil where raccoons have been digging.

In early summer this interdune meadow is dotted with the delicate white flowers of the star rush and is washed with color when the marsh pinks bloom. Like the dunes themselves, it is an area of great fragility, very vulnerable to overuse by man or beast. Heavy grazing and trampling by animals, such as the hogs and horses that ran wild on the island for more than 200 years, and the tearing action of tires threaten the survival of the sand-pinning plants. And if they should be destroyed, the Cumberland dunes will creep westward, engulfing all that lies in their path, at an even faster rate.

In late spring, thousands of tiny, delicate marsh pinks bloom in the interdune meadows. On the older, more stabilized dunes in the northeastern part of the island palmettos and palms struggle with the wind and sand to maintain their footholds.



the secret world of the sloughs and ponds

Hidden away behind the dunes, at the edge of the forest land in the northern half of the island, lies a chain of lakes and sloughs, some large and some small, that are home to a wide variety of wildlife. A walk along one of the old roads that run through this area gives glimpses of a whole series of different worlds—and of their inhabitants if you move really slowly and quietly. This narrow slough is closely overhung by trees, making it dark and still. The only sight or sound of life is a frog, peeping shrilly or suddenly splashing through the thick film of green and purple duckweed floating on the water. The next pool is both larger and brighter; clumps of willow stand up as little islands in the water and reed tussocks dot the shoreline. Here and there are egrets and herons, standing motionless in the shallows awaiting an unwary fish, and a pair or two of quarrelsome coots. Ducks, too, visit these larger pools in spring and fall as they travel the Atlantic flyway—teal, widgeon, pintail, and mallard, dropping in to dabble for food and to rest on their migratory journeys. And on one of the island hummocks a turtle suns itself with raised head, the patterns on its chin and throat mirrored in the dark water.

Lily pads scatter the surface of the larger ponds, the waxy white perfection of their blooms repeated in the smaller, less showy flowers of the arrow-leaved duck potato, and dragonflies pause momentarily upon them as they dart across the lake. Between the plants weaves an anhinga, only its snake-like

Tufts of golden marsh grass rise from little islands in one of Cumberland's many sloughs.

neck showing above the water, and over on the bank an alligator lies motionless—perhaps digesting the last meal or simply awaiting the next.

It takes a sharp eye to spot the Cumberland alligators, even though some of them are quite long. There are not very many of them and the thick growth of vegetation around most of the pools provides plenty of cover. So just possibly an alligator may be heard rather than seen, as it crunches a large turtle between its powerful jaws. The cracking sound when the shell fractures is surprisingly loud and far-carrying.

It is the ponds where sea water mingles with fresh at high tide that are the richest feeding ground for wildlife. The very fact that saltwater comes into the pond discourages the growth of the plants that would gradually convert a freshwater pool into a marsh. So the natural progression, the climax of which is a fully developed forest, is arrested at an early stage, ensuring that open water is maintained.

The regular influx of saltwater into pools that are barely above sea level affects the animal life as well as the plants. Fish such as sheepshead minnow, striped mullet, and sailfin molly come in from the sea, find good feeding among decaying vegetation on the bottom of the pond, and breed prolifically—to provide a fine source of food for fish-eating birds and alligators. There are easy pickings, too, for the predators in some of the smaller pools, where water levels fall drastically during a dry spell. The number of fish may be the same but when they have less swimming space available they are much easier to catch!

A snowy egret surveys the scene as a glossy ibis dips down for a bite in one of the freshwater ponds. Not so easy to spot are the alligators.





Cumberland Island is unusually fortunate in its water areas. They represent a surprising range of size and saltiness and hold a wide variety of water plants. But perhaps most important of all they are generally tucked away from human traffic so that birds and other animals can live there undisturbed.

In a rain pond, rings of pollen mark previous water levels and add a touch of brightness to the dark pool. By remaining quiet and looking carefully, you may see a green tree frog in the wetlands. The marsh-hibiscus grows in the brackish marshes near the salt water.



pictures from the past

Ever since man first arrived on Cumberland he has left his mark on the island. Sometimes his impact has been great; at other times his activities touched the land only lightly and few traces of them remain. But you need little imagination to conjure up pictures of the past as you look at the visible signs of earlier occupations.

There has never been any way to reach Cumberland except by boat, so all who came here in the past must have shared today's experience of winding through the marshes. For the Indians, landing on the island nearly 4,000 years ago, it was a slow journey, paddling a dugout canoe along the waterways and searching for a place to camp. These earliest inhabitants, perhaps only seasonal visitors, were doubtless fishers and hunters, depending heavily on shellfish, which were easy to obtain at any time of the year. Over the centuries vast middens of discarded shells built up at various places near the island's shores; they must have made smelly surroundings for the camps in warm weather!

Though the Indian occupation spanned such a long period, Cumberland was probably almost a virgin wilderness when the Spaniards arrived about 1566. A few trees had been felled, for canoes or to obtain bark for huts, but the forest was virtually untouched. Then the scene changed as the Spaniards set about establishing missions and trying to convert the Indians. Little is known about the mission buildings, but finds of Spanish pottery fragments among the Indian potsherds at the midden site near Dungeness Wharf suggest that

one of the missions was located there. Perhaps the Spaniards recognized that the terrace of shells would provide a well-drained foundation for their settlement. And of course the timber needed for buildings was conveniently at hand.

Timber was important, too, to the British soldiers, many of them Scottish Highlanders, who moved in, under the leadership of James Edward Oglethorpe, in 1736. They were engaged in the fight for Florida and the first thing they did on reaching Cumberland was to start building forts at each end of the island. These were sizable constructions—Fort William on South Point is said to have had barracks for 200 men—but the materials used, mainly timber and sand, did not produce buildings that could withstand the passage of time, and all traces of Fort William and Fort St. Andrews have vanished.

More permanent change came to Cumberland toward the end of the 18th century when settlers began to clear the land for farming. And when Gen. Nathanael Greene, commander of American forces in the south at the end of the Revolution, purchased most of the southern end of the island, logging operations started in earnest. The huge live oak trees provided perfect timber for ship building, and by 1800 skilled lumbermen were arriving each winter to select and cut the branches best suited for particular parts of a ship.

A noble mansion and an elegant garden were planned by Greene for Dungeness, where Oglethorpe had had a hunting lodge of that name. Work

had barely been begun when Greene suddenly fell ill and died in 1786, but it was continued by his widow, who finally moved into the house 7 years later. Once again Indian middens had come in handy, both as a level foundation and as a source of oyster shell for the manufacture of tabby—a kind of concrete made of shells, lime, and gravel—used for building the house.

Life for Catharine Greene, her second husband, Phineas Miller, and their family must have been pleasant. The house was a fine one surrounded by a large garden of tropical plants—including sago palms, oranges, and olive trees, all of which can still be found on the island today—and their plantation produced crops of highest quality sea island cotton. By that time much of the island had been cleared of trees for growing cotton and several hundred slaves toiled in the fields. Remnants of the old slave cabins and a small Negro settlement at Halfmoon Bluff are among the few signs of the plantation era that still remain.

With the passing of the Civil War, the face of Cumberland changed again. Dungeness was destroyed by fire in 1866, the plantations were abandoned, and forest gradually reclaimed much of the island. Social life there took an upward turn again, however, after Thomas Carnegie, brother of Andrew and also Scottish-born, and wife Lucy fell in love with the island during a visit in 1881. Once again a house was raised at Dungeness and once again it fell to a widow to complete the ambitious plans made by her husband.

The new mansion was vast, built of brick and stone on the foundations of the



old. Surrounding the house were formal gardens, alongside was a large wooden building containing a swimming pool and guest rooms, and nearby were stables, carpenter shops, staff dormitories, and so on. As in the days of Catharine Greene, Dungeness became renowned for its social life, with visiting parties enjoying the opportunities for sport provided by the island's wildlife as well as the beauty of the beaches. New roads through the forest gave easy access for duck shooting and deer hunting, horse carriages regularly traveled the live oak avenues, and a golf course was laid out. This last resulted in yet another link with Scotland when a young man was brought from St. Andrews, the home of golf, to act as professional for the Cumberland course. But times changed again and the Dungeness mansion had been standing vacant for many years when, in 1959, it too went up in flames.

Ever since the days of the cotton boom the population of Cumberland has remained small and its impact has been very localized. But perhaps even more important in keeping the island undeveloped and unspoiled have been the the feelings of affection and pride and concern that Cumberland aroused in those who held stakes in its land. The earlier desire of the owners for seclusion, which inevitably meant exclusion of all but a fortunate few, gradually developed into a determination that the island's peace and beauty should not be irrevocably damaged by development of its recreational potential. It was this determination that led in 1972 to Cumberland Island being set apart as a National Seashore, which can be enjoyed by all today.

A statue seems to have the last laugh at Dungeness. Near the ruins of the mansion is what is believed to be the oldest standing building on the island, a small tabby cottage. Plum Orchard, another Carnegie estate, still stands in the west-central part of the island. The plain, clapboard church at Halfmoon Bluff, settled by Negroes after the Civil War, reflects the simpler life of many who made the island their home.



memories to take away

A common characteristic of islands, and one which is true of Cumberland, is the absence of any sense of urgency. There is instead a delightfully restful feeling that if something is not done now it can quite well be done later. But, sadly, departure times can seldom be postponed.

The memories of Cumberland one carries away are inevitably colored by the weather, the season, the places visited, and the length of stay. Only those who come during the winter, for example, have a chance to see the great rolls of fog that sometimes sweep in to blanket sea, beach, and land, so that all merge into a gray nothingness. And only those who camp on the island have an opportunity to experience the helpful “togetherness” that is such a warming feature of life in an isolated community.

But even the briefest of visits will provide memories to refresh you long after your return to the bustling life of the mainland. Perhaps they will be of sights . . . morning mist rising from the marshes, deer starting out from the shadow of the live oaks, or sand swirling along the beach and blowing in plumes from the dune crests. Or perhaps they will be of sounds . . . the “sudsy” murmur of fiddler crabs on the move or the plaintive cry of the plovers that shared the beach with you.

The memorable sights and sounds of Cumberland are many and varied. But there is one thing they do have in common: all carry with them a feeling of tranquillity and repose.

**A morning fog rolls in over a rain pool, and (next page)
turkeys stalk across the dunes. Both are memories of
Cumberland not soon forgotten.**





Photo credits (insets are in parentheses):

James Valentine—Cover, Pages 13, 13 (crab), 14, 18 (Spanish moss), 20, 24, 26-27, 29, 30 (dunes), 32, 36, 36 (frog), 38, 44.

Woodbridge Williams—Pages 2-3, 11, 16-17, 42, 42 (Plum Orchard and church).

Valerie Thom—Pages 6, 8-9.

Burt Rhyne—Pages 13 (periwinkle), 17 (kingsnake), 24 (turnstones and eggs), 30, 35, 35 (alligator), 36 (marsh-hibiscus).

Paul McCrary—Pages 17 (fungus), 18, 23 (backpackers).

Park Service—Pages 23, 42 (tabby cottage), 46-47.

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