

Section 1

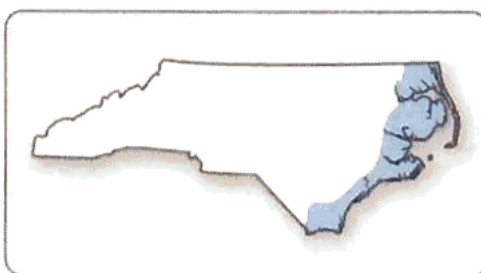
The Tidewater Region

Map 1 North Carolina's Regions

Map Skill: In which region do you live?

As you read, look for:

- the features of the Tidewater region
- the barrier islands
- North Carolina's five major sounds
- major rivers in the Tidewater region
- vocabulary terms **sound**, **barrier islands**, **inlet**, **Gulf Stream**, **wetland**, **estuary**, **pocosin**, **savanna**



Water, water, everywhere! That describes the **Tidewater**. This narrow strip of land extends along the Atlantic Ocean. In the southern part of the state's coast, the Tidewater is no more than thirty miles wide, but in the north, where inland bodies of water are large, it goes back more than fifty miles in places. Throughout the region, the land is influenced by the daily movement of the ocean's tides. The tides alter currents in streams and sounds. **Sounds** are the inland bodies of mixed water found through much of the Tidewater. The resulting mix of salt and fresh water distinguishes the Tidewater from the other regions of the state.



Barrier Islands

The islands off the North Carolina coast form the beach for much of the Tidewater. They have influenced life in the state from the first explorations to the present. Only a few islands, like Roanoke, where the first English attempt at settlement was made, sit alone. Most are part of a long chain of sand spits called **barrier islands**, the most famous of which, along the northern half of the state coastline, are called the **Outer Banks**.

The barrier islands are really just a very long ridge of sand, spread along the ocean floor, ever shifting in the tides and storms that come off the Atlantic. Like the tips of icebergs, only the tops of the barrier islands show above the waterline. Most of the barrier islands are less than two miles across. In some places, a visitor can actually see from shore to sound. The size of the sand can vary considerably. At Cape Hatteras, the barrier island is wide enough to still support a considerable maritime forest, made up of bay, holly, and live oak trees. The highest point along the barrier islands is at Jockey's Ridge, located not far from Kitty Hawk, where the Wright Brothers first flew. Although the winds shift the sand daily, Jockey's Ridge averages about 114 feet in elevation, making it the highest natural point on the eastern seaboard. Where



Top: The Outer Banks are accessible to all state residents at the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. The sea oats shown are an important preserver of the sand dunes on the barrier islands.

Above: Hang gliding on Jockey's Ridge imitates the earlier flights of the Wright Brothers on nearby Kill Devil Hill.



Map 2 North Carolina's Barrier Islands and Sounds

Map Skill: What are the three
capes identified on the map?

the sand has low places, **inlets** allow the seawater to come in and out with the tides. Because the ocean is endlessly churning the sand and the water, different inlets have opened and closed at various times. For example, Roanoke Inlet, which English explorers used in the 1500s, is long gone. Today, North Carolinians in that vicinity use Oregon Inlet, which was carved out by a hurricane in 1846.

The very eastern nose of our state, Cape Hatteras, is the peak of a huge spit of sand that projects out for miles into the ocean. The ocean current running by it, heading north, is the **Gulf Stream**, one of the principal influences in the world's weather. It carries warm water from the Gulf of Mexico across the Atlantic to the British Isles. Cooler water is then pushed south toward Africa, to be warmed once again near the equator. Before airplanes, this was the "road" ships took back from the New World to the Old World. Relatively speaking, then, North Carolina is located at the place where the warm wa-

ter began to move toward the colder north. In fact, Cape Hatteras for centuries was known as the "graveyard of the Atlantic" because frigid Arctic water, known as the Labrador Current, collided with the warmer Gulf Stream just offshore. The turbulence made for unexpected storms. That is why the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse has become so legendary. It served a vital purpose in world commerce.

The only true break in the barrier islands along the state's shoreline is Cape Fear, where the Cape Fear River flows directly into the sea. Otherwise, all the other rivers in the eastern half of the state flow into the sounds behind the islands.

The Sounds

North Carolina has five major sounds. Almost half of the Tidewater area is made up of these mixed bodies of water that are just behind the barrier islands. The largest ones are Currituck Sound, in the north, followed, as one goes south, by Albemarle Sound, Pamlico Sound, Core Sound, and Bogue Sound. Pamlico is the deepest and largest, at least twenty feet deep much of the year.

Each of the major sounds is fed fresh water by a river coming from the Coastal Plain. Near the mouths of these rivers are located some of the oldest towns in North Carolina. These towns were trading centers where goods could be transferred from river flatboats onto the schoo-

ners that would take goods into the ocean. The town of Washington, for example, sits just upstream from the mouth of the Pamlico River, which feeds into the Pamlico Sound. The Trent and the Neuse rivers come together at New Bern and also feed into the Pamlico. In addition to the sound towns are small fishing villages like Wanchese, Englehard, Atlantic, and Oriental, all of which front onto Pamlico Sound. The southernmost fishing villages are Southport and Calabash.

Sedimentation (the depositing of clay or silt or gravel) through time has kept the sounds from being deep enough for large oceangoing vessels. Thus, towns located where rivers run into the sounds, like Edenton, Bath, or New Bern, never grew into ports the size of Savannah, Georgia, or Norfolk, Virginia. The direct outlet to the sea enjoyed by the city of Wilmington, in the southeast corner of the state, is why that seaport was North Carolina's largest town through most of the state's history.

A large portion of the land in the Tidewater is **wetland** most of the year, meaning that the soil is soaked or flooded with water. All along its shores are salt marshes where shellfish breed and live. These mucky **estuaries** serve as incubators for a variety of sea life, such as shrimp.



Above: The Bodie Island Lighthouse was one of several on the Outer Banks that helped ships from becoming victims of the "Graveyard of the Atlantic." **Left:** The fishing village of Oriental is a popular destination for sailboat enthusiasts.



Did You Know?

The first lighthouse along the North Carolina coast was erected in 1793 on Bald Head Island. Bald Head Island is located at the mouth of the Cape Fear River.

Below: The Green Swamp is one of the largest in the state and is home to unique vegetation like the Venus Fly Trap. **Bottom:** Lake Waccamaw, one of the largest in the state, covers almost 9,000 acres.

Swamps and Lakes

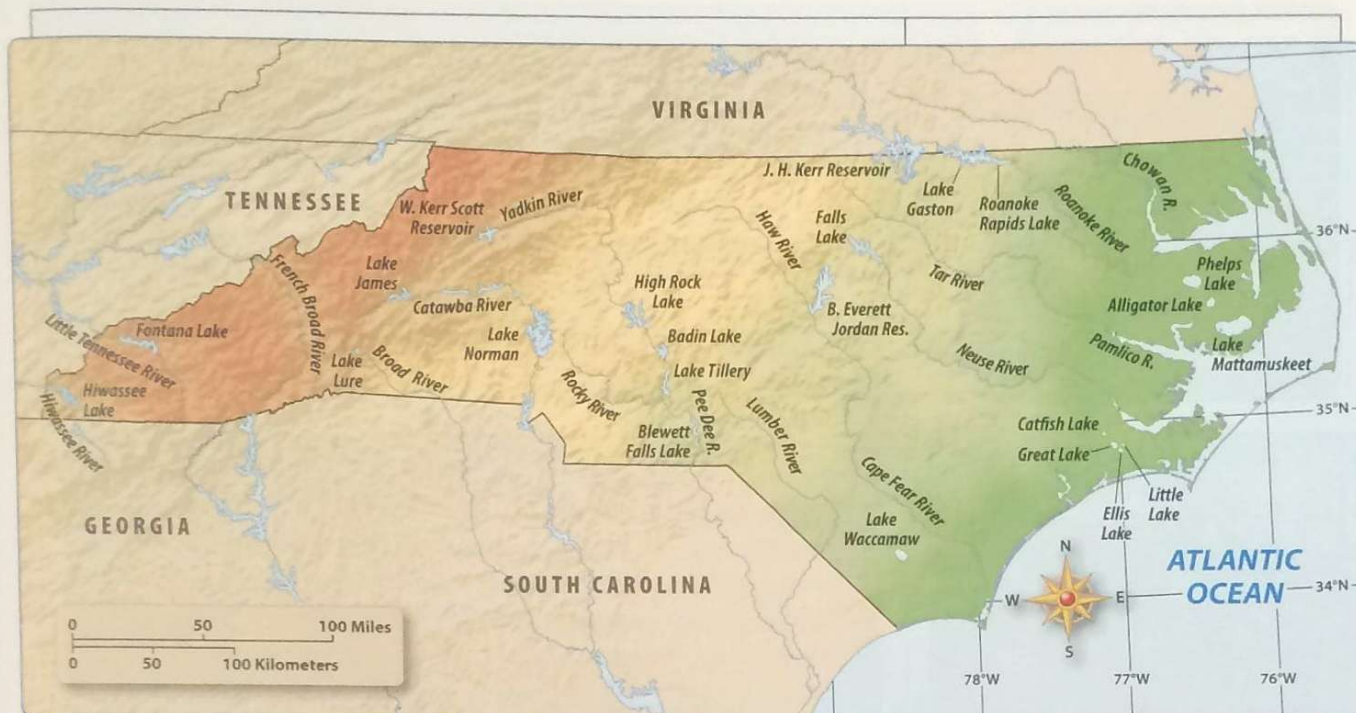
The most common type of wetland away from the estuaries are **pocosins**. The term is an old Indian name for a particular type of swamp. It means "a swamp on a hill," made up of peat that fills with water when the water table is high. Pocosins are found from the Albemarle Sound all the way to the Cape Fear. They are distinguished by their vegetation, most often having a mix of laurel, bay, and scrub oak trees as their foliage. Alligator Pocosin makes up the bulk of the land between the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds. Big Pocosin is located near the town of Washington.

Another Tidewater habitat is the **savanna**, where tall grass mixes with scattered longleaf and other types of pine. Parts of the Green Swamp, the most extensive wetland at the southern end of the Tidewater, become

savannas in the drier times of the year. The Green Swamp is the habitat for one of North Carolina's unique plants, the Venus Fly Trap, a type of trumpet plant that catches a variety of bugs with its hair-lined "pitchers." The vital parts of the bugs are gradually absorbed into the plants for nourishment.

Most of the natural lakes in North Carolina are in the Tidewater. Lake Mattamuskeet, the largest, is fifteen miles across at its longest, but averages only about six feet in depth. It is a major land-





ing point for migratory birds along the Atlantic coast and is today a wildlife refuge. Not far from Mattamuskeet are Pungo and Phelps lakes, smaller but similar in appearance. On the edge of the southern part of the Tidewater, adjacent to the Green Swamp, is Lake Waccamaw. Its longest stretch is five miles, but, like the others, it is very shallow.

Through time, the Tidewater has been one of the least populated portions of the state. Many of the early families either fished or supplied goods to the fishing trade. Some families today can trace their ancestry all the way back to the 1600s. Some residents of Ocracoke, one of the Outer Banks islands, still speak with an accent that sounds like their distant ancestors. This “hoi toide” brogue uses words similar to the English spoken in the days of William Shakespeare. For example, Ocracokers might “call over the mail” instead of get the mail. They might say they “had a gutful of food” when they were full from a meal. If they got nauseous they would become “quamished in my gut.” If they met someone from another region of North Carolina, like the Coastal Plain, they would call that person not an outsider, but “a dingbatter.”

It's Your Turn

1. What are the Outer Banks?
2. What ocean current flows off the eastern coast of North Carolina?
3. What is a wetland?
4. What is the largest natural lake in North Carolina?

Map 3 North Carolina's Rivers and Lakes

Map Skill: What is the westernmost river on the map?