ECOLOGY & SIGNIFICANCE

Carolina Beach State Park is a 716 acre park located in New Hanover County, North Carolina. The park is located on Pleasure Island, home to Carolina and Kure Beach, between the Atlantic Ocean and Cape Fear River. The property was purchased by the state and designated as a state park in 1969 in an effort to preserve the unique environment along the Intercoastal Waterway.

Three wetland ecosystems are found at the park. Pocosin swamps are located between dry forests on relict sand dunes and brackish marshes adjacent to the Cape Fear River. These dense shrub forests are wet and poorly drained with nutrient poor and acidic soils which lends to unique diversity and floral species. Fire is an important and normal part of this ecosystem during dry summer periods and helps maintain its biodiversity. Three limestone sink ponds, each vegetated by a unique plant community, are also found within the park. These depressions are formed when the underlying limestone dissolves over time. As widening and deepening are variable and occur over time, water depth and plant communities vary between the three sinks.

FLORA & FAUNA

Carolina Beach State Park is known for its rich carnivorous plant populations located in both the pocosin and limestone sink ecosystems including the Carolina Venus Fly Trap, Yellow and Purple Pitcher Plants, and Butterwort.

The park also supports a diverse resident bird community and serves as an important migratory corridor. Brown pelicans thrive in the coastal environment, and warblers, finches and woodpeckers fill the woods. In summer, painted buntings, yellowthroats and prairie warblers can be seen in the forest, while ospreys populate Snow’s Cut along the Intercoastal Waterway. Reptile and amphibian species also populate the various wetland ecosystems and wetland/upland ecotone.

THREATS/MANAGEMENT

The most persistent threat and management effort is to preserve the carnivorous plant population from off-trail trampling and poaching. The park also manages invasive Phragmites sp. populations in the brackish marsh. Rises in sea levels has caused considerable mortality and damages to pocosin vegetation near river high-tide levels during large tidal events and of course storms and surges.

ACCESS/SOURCES

Park hours and trail system maps can be found at https://www.ncparks.gov/carolina-beach-state-park/