

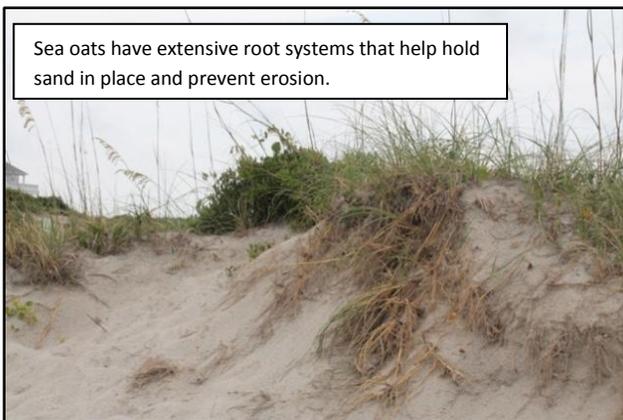
Residents of the Reserve

Have you ever wondered what kinds of plants and animals call the Masonboro Island component of the North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserveⁱ home? N.C. Coastal Reserve Education Specialist Marie Davis knows that if you are curious, attending the “Residents of the Reserve” educational program this summer in Wrightsville Beach may help answer some of your questions. The interpretive nature hike through dune and beach ecosystems is a perfect opportunity for explorers of all ages to learn more about unique coastal wildlife.

The hike starts at the Wrightsville Beach public access pavilion, where participants can look at field guides to get a preview of what they might see on the beach. Although Wrightsville Beach is not a part of the N.C. Coastal Reserve system, Davis says it is close enough to Masonboro Island to share many similar ecological characteristics, and it allows participants to access relevant educational programs without boating over to Masonboro Island.



Walking from the pavilion to an impressive dune formation, Davis explains that plants play important roles in wetland and dune ecosystems. Plants such as sea oats help keep sand in place through their extensive root structure, and tidally submerged marsh grasses provide habitat and refuge for a variety of fish and snails. At an interactive station, participants can view sea oat seeds, blanket flowers, and smooth cordgrass grass under a magnifying glass. Intrepid coastal explorers can even expand their culinary horizons by tasting the edible pickleweed plant!



Davis as participants view fiddler crab, horseshoe crab, and cannonball jellyfish. In coastal ecosystems, invertebrates can influence water quality, provide a nutrition source for birds and fish, and in some cases, are harvested as seafood for human consumption.

Marlene Eader, the volunteer coordinator for the Wrightsville Beach chapter of the North Carolina Audubon Society, joined the group as the nature hike wound towards the southern tip of Wrightsville Beach. This area serves as nesting habitat for American Oystercatchers, Least Terns, Common Terns, and Black Skimmers. Eader explains that the sandy dune area offers protection and camouflage for the tan and speckled eggs of nesting shorebirds. Recently



hatched chicks can be spotted resting under their mothers, running amongst the dune plants, or even learning to fly and catch small fish. Davis and Eader also emphasize how humans can minimize their impact on nesting areas, by respecting marked off areas of beach, keeping dune habitat intact, keeping pets on a leash to avoid nest disturbance, and giving birds plenty of space to nest and rear their young.

By the time nature hike participants reached the pavilion, chatter turned to future opportunities to explore Wrightsville Beach and the Masonboro Island Reserve. Although many people visit North Carolina's beaches every summer, the nature hike revealed new plants and animals that make beach and wetland ecosystems so special. Taking a closer look at these Reserve residents can make your next beach visit exciting and educational!

ⁱ The North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserve is part of the North Carolina Coastal Reserve, which is administered by the North Carolina Division of Coastal Management.