

# Field Trip Explores Coastal Habitats at the Rachel Carson Reserve

A habitat is the natural environment where a particular organism lives. Gathered on the sandy tip of Town Marsh, students from Newport Elementary School's second grade class thought about what made their homes and classrooms so important: roofs over their heads, family members to take care of them, food in the refrigerator, and teachers to help them reach their potential. Imagine the students surprise when they discovered that they were visiting a unique ecosystem that fulfills those same functions for hundreds of coastal creatures! Prompted by questions from Education Coordinator Lori Davis, the second-graders thought about all the ways that estuaries make good habitats for a variety of species. After exploring four representative habitat types found on the Rachel Carson Reserve, students better understood why so many creatures call estuaries home!



## Water's Edge

The group first explored the water's edge by strolling along Taylor's Creek, across from historic downtown Beaufort. Lori pointed out plumed tube worms buried in the wet sand, reminding students that this was a way that the worms hid themselves from predators. Students also got to see artificial habitat created by an old tire, now home to water-filtering oysters and an excellent hiding place for crabs.



## Marsh

The next habitat, just a short walk from the edge of the creek, was the saltmarsh. When asked to describe this area, students threw out words like "stinky" (because of the low oxygen in the soil), "slimy," and "muddy." Lori explained that this area has lots of small snails and other invertebrates that feed on detritus, or decomposing material, found in the muddy marsh bottom. Students got to touch mud snails, see periwinkle snails climb up marsh grasses in response to the tides, and even taste the salty marsh plant pickleweed (*Salicornia virginica*)!



## Maritime Forest

At a slightly higher elevation, and offering the protection of live oak, yaupon holly, and southern magnolia trees, the maritime forests of the Rachel Carson Reserve are a valuable habitat for species seeking shelter, such as the wild horses that roam the islands. This site also offered an opportunity for the group to taste leaves from the "toothache tree" (prickly ash), which was used as a numbing agent by early dentists before tooth extractions!



## Ocean Beach

After walking past sandy dunes, students wandered the ocean beach, looking for shells and invertebrates buried in the sand. One group found a beautiful sunray venus clam (*Macrocallista nimbosa*), while another student showed the class an interesting lettered olive snail (*Oliva sayana*) that he had seen in the shallow water. Educators from the Reserve even pointed out a well camouflaged whelk egg case buried in the sand, highlighting how well-disguised offspring can be once they are deposited by their mother.

After exploring four distinct habitats, students were enthusiastic about their experience at the Reserve. Second grader Gavin Gooden claimed the field trip was the "best day of my life, because I like to explore wildlife and I want to be a biologist." Each explorer had a favorite creature that made their trip memorable, such as Shane Baysden's love for "all the crabs— fiddler crabs, hermit crabs, and ghost crabs!" Learning about the different habitats present at the Reserve, and why specific animals and plants are well-suited to living in estuarine environments, helped students understand what a valuable coastal resource can be found just a few miles from their school!