

Volunteer Day at Cape Romain's Bulls Island

It was cold that Saturday, January 31st, as we all began to arrive at Garris Landing for our trip out to Bulls Island. But the sun was shining brightly and the faces were all smiles as we stood around in the parking lot re-acquainting ourselves with friends we hadn't seen for awhile and meeting new folks that had recently joined the Sewee Center and Cape Romain Refuge staff and volunteers. The day trip had been planned to recognize the team of volunteers that had supported Sewee and Cape Romain during 2008. Later in the day we would learn that, in 2008, the volunteers had provided 13,053 hours that equates to 6+ full-time employees. So it was fitting to celebrate that accomplishment, but a day trip to Bulls was more than we all expected.



We boarded the concessionaires ferry boat at the pier, each carrying our belongings needed for the day and a covered dish to share during lunch. The dishes would prove to be scrumptious and a tasty complement to the main dishes provided by the Refuge. Once on the ferry, we huddled a bit to keep warm as we left the pier and worked our way East through the Intracoastal Waterway and into the scenic waterways of the Refuge. While heading slowly but surely to Bulls, our fearless Captain Chris Crolley, began to describe many of the features of the area including water properties, oyster habitats, types of fish in the area, and the various birds that make the waterways their home. Even a few dolphins showed up to make the trip a bit special. He would often pose questions to us as part of our learning process and, as a group we probably got a "C" but, then again, to some of us we had an excuse that we couldn't hear the question or it was just too cold to answer.



Upon arrival at Bulls Island, the Refuge staff had two open bay vehicles to transport us to the Dominick House and then later to the scenic areas on the Island. Once we had stowed our gear and the food, we hopped back into the vehicles and started our tour. Our Captain began to discuss the flora and fauna of Bulls Island including everything from the trees, plants and bushes to the waterfowl, birds and alligators. Along the way, we were very excited about two large gators who were sunning themselves (I told you it was cold, didn't I?). One of the gators was stretched across the road in front of our vehicle. After leaving the vehicle, we walked slowly, and in a safe deliberate manner, toward the magnificent beast to get as close as we could to take photos. Some of us used our binoculars to get extremely close looks at every detail while the gator just "dozed". After a time, the gator opened his deep green eyes and seemed to be a bit bored with us because he began to back pedal a bit and then slid back down the embankment and into the dark water. It is always amazing to see how the gator becomes "invisible" in his natural watery habitat.



Our tour took us over the levees where we had wonderful vistas of the water basins and the waterfowl living there. Our final stop before lunch was on the beach side of the Island referred to as the "Bone Yard" where bleached white trees are trying to survive the daily tidal activities or have already given up, lying dead in the sand. We were told how Hurricane Hugo had such a devastating effect on this particular area, yet the whiteness of the tree trunks and branches against the blue sky and sandy beaches provided a beautiful photo rendition of a deserted island suitable for a Robinson Crusoe film. After walking around a bit to take it all in, we hopped on board our transport and headed for the Dominick House.



What seems like chaos in having us all cram into the kitchen upon our arrival, soon turns into an organized buffet with a wonderful variety of salads, entrees and desserts. Once finished, Ranger Trish Lynch exceed an awards presentation with gift packs to those volunteers who had provided significant hours to the Refuge and Center. One feels very good to witness this activity because it shows how people do care about the environment enough that they are willing to provide the man hours necessary to essentially double the paid staff at the Refuge. Sarah Dawsey, Refuge Biologist, also had some kind words about the many hours volunteers had given to the turtle nesting project. Special recognition was given to Volunteer Jim Hawkins who had given 3000 hours of his time and talents since 2002. The entire awards ceremony left everyone feeling good about the volunteering they had done regardless of how many hours they were able to provide.



With our bellies full and our hearts warmed, we had a couple hours of quiet time to ourselves. Wayne Tucker and Greg Geathers transported some folks to the north and south ends of the Island while others walked the beach. Some just rested at the House and others fished off the dock. I chose to just walk to the beach and sit on a log taking in the serenity and vista of a wide quiet beach and the beautiful Atlantic Ocean. The walk back to the boat dock also offered some beautiful photo opportunities with an accentuated sun angle and serene reflective scenes. The sun was starting to go down, the temperature was dropping and the tide was on the way out when we boarded the ferry.



The last half of the boat trip was a bit quieter and more lengthy as we had to take an alternate channel back due to low tide conditions. Indeed, by the time Captain Chris brought our craft to the dock, the tide was so low that he just drove the boat onto the pluff mud as though it were a boat ramp. We gave him a nice round of applause for a fine "docking" and worked our way back to our cars. What a great day it was and what a wonderful group of people to be with. Speaking for the volunteers, a "special thanks" goes out to the Refuge Staff who organized the day and made everything go so well. Some of them gave up their Saturday to make it happen. With good people like that, why wouldn't we want to volunteer to help them and help ourselves at the same time?

Volunteer David Shuckstes

Photographs by Volunteer Ricky Wrenn