

The Ash Wednesday Storm

Travis McDaniel
Retired (1960-1994)

Mr. McDaniel recounts a storm that happened while he was assistant manager at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge in 1962. The storm was the effect of a northeaster and the “spring tide” coming together and causing major flooding and beach erosion along the eastern shore. Mr. McDaniel talks about the condition of the beach, having to evacuate, checking in with the manager of Back Bay, and beach combing after the storm. He also shares stories of a couple locals there, one that ended on a happy note and one that did not.

Keywords: Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge; Don Pollard, John Sincook, refuges

In 1962 I was the assistant manager at Back Bay Refuge in Virginia, which at that time was in region four. My family and I were the only ones living on the refuge at that time, and the refuge was only accessible by driving five miles of beach – there was no road. Gale force winds were common, and when we had some really strong winds all one night, I didn't think too much about it. The northeaster was still blowing strong the next morning as I prepared to leave for Mackey Island. I was still a little drowsy as I drove out the driveway and topped the ramp over the dunes, or as I should say, where the dunes had been. At that very moment, a wave crashed in and came all the way up to the truck before its force dissipated. I came awake in a hurry. I had experienced gale force winds before, and had even seen the effects of winds from three different hurricanes since I had been at Back Bay, but this was worse – much worse. Something different was causing this. I had never seen a storm surge so high.

I backed the truck off the ramp, got out, and walked back up to the ramp. There was no beach, and precious little was left of the dunes. In a matter of 15 minutes I watched what had been a large dune on the north side of the ramp - vegetated with sea oats - melt down to nothing, as if it were sugar. I just stood there and watched in amazement one of nature's more furious onslaughts - the ocean against the shore! It was one of the most awesome sights I had ever seen. I saw very clearly there was nothing man could do to stop what was happening. The hundreds of hours we spent putting up sand fence to catch the drifting sand and build the dunes was for naught. It was all gone in a matter of a few hours. In those moments I began to form the genesis of my philosophy against trying to manage, alter or control natural environmental systems in a manner alien to natural processes. Barrier islands were meant to be over washed periodically, not to be permanent sentinels against the ocean.

I went back to the office to call the refuge manager, Don Ambrosen, to tell him what was going on, but couldn't raise the Coast Guard operator in Virginia Beach on our Coast Guard telephone line. I climbed the wooden tower to see if I could better ascertain the damage to the barrier beach, but the mist and blowing sand was so bad I could see very little. I called the Little Island Coast Guard Station, just north of our boundary, to see how they were fairing. I talked to Don Pollard, the youngest Coast Guardsman at the station, and a friend of mine.

“Don! How are y'all doing? Is there anything left of Little Island?”

“We're alive but this place is in a hell of a mess! You know those dunes in front of our barracks – well they aren't there anymore. The waves are breaking in the assembly area where the flagpole used to be. All of our buildings were in the ocean and surrounded by water at high tide a few hours ago.”

“Well how about now?”

“We can see a little sand now that it's ebbing,” he went on, “I'm the only one left here – me and Fritz, that is. The whole crew except me was sent to Chincoteague last night when this thing first hit up there.”

“Everything is okay down here at the refuge. I can take the crawler tractor and the farm wagon and track it behind the dunes up to the station and pick y’all up if you want to come down here,” I offered.

“You couldn’t make it here in the crawler. There’s an inlet cut all the way from the ocean to the bay just south of the station. No, we’re fine here. We’ve got the coffee pot going and have everything we need to survive. Thanks anyway.”

“Okay, I guess we’ll just stick it out. Let me know if I can do anything.”

After that I went out to the boathouse to make sure all the boats were secure. The northeaster had blown all the water out of the bay and the boats were resting on the mud. I adjusted all the tie lines to make sure they had enough slack. Since there was absolutely nothing else I could do outside, I finished up some office work and then went to the house and built us a big fire in the fireplace. Joyce and I spent the rest of the day playing with the girls and just enjoying some “administrative leave”. In the late afternoon the calm was broken when our oldest daughter, Cindy, came running into the living room hollering, “Mama, Mama, there’s a big helicopter in the back yard!”

When I went outside to see, there was a huge Navy chopper hovering a few feet off the ground. Don Pollard rappelled down a line and ran over to tell me they were taking everyone on the beach to a shelter in Princess Anne. I told him we were fine, we had everything we needed and that we would stay. He said I had no choice, they were evacuating everyone on the beach, and that included him and us. Everyone had to go!

Seeing they were determined to not leave without us, I reluctantly gathered a few belongings and we all climbed aboard. Once in, the pilot asked if there was anybody else to the south of us. I told him about the community at Wash Woods. He said they would have to send another chopper for them. I could just see this helicopter evacuation experience frightening our two girls and warping them for life. I was relieved when I looked over and saw Cindy taking it all in and Laurel sound asleep in Joyce’s arms. Oh well, so much for the kids being scared out of their wits.

When we landed I called Don from the evacuation shelter and he invited us to stay at his house until we could go back to the refuge. We gladly accepted, not wanting to spend the night on a hard basketball floor at a high school gym.

The next day I flew the whole general area with Fish and Wildlife biologist John Sincock in the state’s floatplane. We took several salinity readings in Back Bay and Currituck Sound. The cuts where the ocean came over and washed into the bay were clearly visible. One was just north of the refuge, at the Little Island Coast Guard Station, and one was just to the south of the refuge. Several more were reported further down in Carolina. Both of these over washes had already sanded in, but not before a considerable volume of saltwater had entered the bay. Ironically, John’s multi-year research study, which he had just finished, recommended the introduction of saltwater into Back Bay to

improve aquatic plant production for waterfowl use. The study concluded this was the main reason for the decline of waterfowl use on Back Bay. The over wash from the storm brought the salinity in Back Bay almost up to the point John was going to recommend – ten percent sea strength.

During the flight I leaned forward and shouted to John over the engine noise. “John, I need to check out everything at the headquarters. We need a few more clothes too, since they’re going to keep the beach closed a day or two longer. Can you get this thing close enough to shore for me to get out?”

“I’ll try,” he said, as he sat the plane down on what little water was still left in the deeper part of the bay.

As John maneuvered the floatplane towards the headquarters, we ran out of water completely. However, by riving the engine and alternating pressure on the rudder peddles, he was able to zigzag the plane on top of the still moist mud all the way to the headquarters bulkhead. I hopped out, gave everything a quick once over, picked up some more clothes, jumped back in the plane and we took off again.

As mentioned, everyone at the Little Island Coast Guard Station (except Don Pollard) was sent to Chincoteague to assist with the rescue efforts there. The storm had struck up the coast several hours earlier than at Back Bay, and damage was extensive. People had drowned, hundreds of houses had been destroyed and caskets had even been washed out of the ground. Damage from the storm also extended as far south as Cape Hatteras.

A coming together of two otherwise normal phenomenon caused the disaster. A fairly routine northeaster, combined with the normal equinox “spring tide”, was responsible for the excessively high storm surge – especially at the time of high tide. Spring tides routinely produce tides that are several feet higher at high tide and several feet lower at low tide, than they are normally. The newspapers called the Ash Wednesday Storm of 1962, “...the worst to hit Virginia and North Carolina in recent memory.” Damage was estimated at over three million dollars.

The Little Island Coast Guard Station was the scene of some real heart tugging drama during the storm. Fitzhugh Munden, fisherman and all around waterman, lived with his golden retriever, Sam, in a small squatter shack just behind the station. He told me he woke up during the night when he realized that his hand, which was hanging over the side of the bed, was in water. Jumping out of bed, he discovered a foot or so of water in his shack. He made his way to the front porch where he could see the ocean had cut an inlet to the bay directly in front of him. Fearing that the strong current would wash everything away, he jumped in the water and waded to a large metal buoy anchored in what served for his yard.

“I held onto the buoy ‘till the tide finally turned, then I made my way through the waist deep water over to the Coast Guard Station,” Fitz told me later.

“That must have scared you half to death! How long did you have to stay there?”

“An hour or two I guess. It’s a hell of a feeling hanging on to a buoy out in the water in the pitch black dark, and the wind blowing a gale! Once I got to the station, though, Pollard and me made a pot of coffee and just sat back and waited ‘er out.

Fitz lost track of Sam while he was hanging on the buoy and thought he had lost his dog for sure. However, when he was able to come back a few days later, there was Sam, faithfully waiting at what was left of the shack. That story, along with Sam’s picture, made a great human-interest article when it appeared in a Norfolk newspaper.

Another drama that occurred in the nearby Wash Woods community, but one that did not turn out as well, was also told to me later. Another “outer banker” also watched as water flooded into his house that night. He placed his old and sickly mother onto a mattress in an effort to float her out before the house was completely washed away. I was told she died of a heart attack before he was able to get her to a safe location.

It was a couple of days later before the authorities let people back on the beach again. In those days beach combing was a way of life for everyone who lived on the beach. You could find all sorts of interesting things. The beaches south of the Chesapeake Bay were especially productive for all manner of items shipped by freighters. Oil drums, fuel cans, lumber and hundreds of other useful items were routinely found and collected by those of us who lived on the beach. Immediately after a storm was an especially productive time, and I was anxious to drive the beach and see what we could find.

The beach was littered with thousands of conchs, something we normally didn’t find on this beach. Some of the more unusual and interesting things we found after the storm included refrigerators, freezers (with food still partially frozen), a set of encyclopedias and endless other household goods. One man from Norfolk found a fossilized walrus skull and tusk that dated to the last ice age. I even found a wooden boat that was in perfect shape. Unfortunately for me, the owner’s name was on the stern. The boat had washed down all the way from Chincoteague, over 100 miles to the north. I called the man and he came and picked it up, thankful to get the fishing boat back he thought he would never see again.

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