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## Lakes Mattamuskeet and Pungo are havens for birders

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LAKE MATTAMUSKEET — This is a story about birds. Big, honking white birds.

Literally.

I have always had a fondness for birds, especially water birds. Webbed feet and feathers are a wonderful combination.

I've often trailed my sister about the bays and rivers of Florida, angling my Canon at every tidal pool, wading and splashing and sinking in sand just to get that special shot.



But, fellow waterbirders, you don't have to go to Florida to find them. We've got them right here in North Carolina almost in our own backyard. And, if you're willing to brave a little cold in the winter months do a little hiking, we've got birds Floridians can only dream about right up in Hyde County's Lake Mattamuskeet.

I'm talking about tundra swans and snow geese that flock to Mattamuskeet and other nearby lakes, such as the Pungo National Wildlife Refuge, in the thousands.

Flying thousands of miles from their homes in Canada and Alaska, they settle in the grass-rich lakes to rest up and feed until they start winging their way home late in February. December and January are their peak times.

A large lens, good binoculars, and decent hiking shoes are a real plus if you plan to go. Figure about two hours' drive time (from New Bern) and remember that, once you pass Washington, there's basically nothing but farmers' fields. McDonald's has not left his footprint in this land. Pack your lunch.

You will easily find a lot of waterfowl at Mattamuskeet, but to find the geese and swans in truly large numbers, your best bet is to add nearby Lake Pungo to your itinerary.

Mattamuskeet is named for a local tribe of Algonquain Indians, allies of the Tuscarora who waged a war against local colonists from 1711 to 1714. After that war, the survivors on the losing side were granted official refuge at the lake, making it the first Indian reservation in North Carolina.

In those days, it was three times bigger than it is today, much of the lake being drained off to provide farmland, but even today Mattamuskeet is the largest natural lake in North Carolina, covering 40,000 acres. That's about 18 miles in length and six in width. It is also, possibly, the shallowest lake with an average depth, at peak in the winter, of about two and a half feet.

The bottom is grassy, which provides prime feeding the huge tundra swans and snow

geese, who can be observed in three basic positions on the water: head erect; neck entwined about the back with the head buried under the wing for a snooze; or only the tail-end above water, short tail feathers pointing skyward, as the swan grazes beneath.

When you go to Mattamuskeet, it is well worth rising early to catch the sunrise. Don't take the Bayview-Aurora ferry if you do — its first trip is at 6:15 a.m. and that'll make it tight to reach the lake in time.

N.C. 94 goes across the lake, north to south, on a causeway with an observation deck located about two miles in that gives a fine view of a stand of cypress on the lake. Morning shots — during and after the sunrise — turn out beautifully. I have been to Mattamuskeet three times now and have gotten different effects from the sunrise every time. Always there has been a golden hue in the sky; often that same hue is reflected across the water giving it the appearance of a golden carpet. Other times it has given a deep orange reflection.

While birds are not hard to find there is of course no guarantee where you will find them. A couple of years ago the lake had numerous, if small, groups of birds bobbing about for my dawn shots. This year, there wasn't a swan to be seen.

When you have finished your shoot there, turn and head back to the south shore. Keep an eye on the shoreline, because swans, any variety of ducks and herons are likely to be probing about.

Turn left onto Mattamuskeet road (also known as the Entrance Road), a dirt road (you do *not* want to wash your car before you come) that follows alongside an impoundment that is kept flooded in winter months for the benefits of birds. At Mattamuskeet, this is where you will see the most swans. Numerous ducks and coots also populate this area, and you might stumble upon a muskrat or two (a couple of years ago I spent a good half hour chasing a muskrat around, non-photogenic as these oversized rat-cousins are).

You will also, almost certainly, come upon great blue herons and great white egrets, wading patiently for you to snap your shots — if you're quiet and don't make sudden moves.

The Entrance Road leads to the park headquarters and the old lodge, which is a definite "must" for your visit.

The lodge was actually built as a pump station early in 1914, when the state decided that the lake would best serve the community if it didn't exist. At the time it was the largest set of pumps in the world. The plan was to pump the water from the lake and discharge it into a canal which would, in turn, discharge it into the Pamlico River.

And actual town was planned and built around the pump as it labored three times — in 1916, '20 and '26 — to dry up the lake. But nature had her way, and eventually the state gave up. The pump station was taken over by locals as a lodge that would run successfully until the 1970s. It still stands, though empty and decayed now, the subject of volunteer workers trying to restore it to its once grand condition. The rest of the old town no longer exists.

Still, it is a fine piece of architecture, especially when you consider its main purpose was to house a bunch of oily pumps.

Once you've had a look at the old lodge, cross the little bridge next to it and hang a right onto Wildlife Drive. From here, you can walk a couple of short trails and take advantage of a couple of blinds to observe birds, and ride up Central Canal Road where you might luck out and see some deer.

Mattamuskeet hosts a variety of wildlife — bird, reptilian and mammalian — year round, though the swans and geese have pretty much disappeared by the end of March.

You're best chance to see the truly large numbers of snow geese and tundra swan, however, is to add Pungo Lake to your day. Follow 264 east, grab 45 when it breaks off to the right and take it to the Pungo National Wildlife refuge. This is a 12,000-acre national refuge that includes Pungo Lake, forest area and fields. The fields are rented out to farmers, according to refuge manager Howard Phillips. In lieu of rent they are required to leave a portion of their crops to feed the geese and swans.

You may have to drive around a bit to find your quarry: their location changes day by day among the various fields or areas of the lake. The roads are dirt, and in wet weather can become mud: Canal Road, that I followed, was at one point flooded. You can make it around in any decent car, but a 4-wheel drive wouldn't be a bad idea.

With a little patience, the geese and swans are there. Phillips said that, this year, they are counting upwards of 34,000 swans and 50,000-60,000 snow geese. You can identify the geese by their black wingtips; the swans are larger with very long necks.

Pungo also hosts 20-odd varieties of ducks.

The reserve, Phillips said, is also host to bears and red wolves. The red wolves, being reserved, are rarely seen, but bears can be a more common sight.

"We have one of the densest black bear populations reported anywhere in the scientific literature," he noted. "They're wild animals, so you have to keep your distance from them. You have to know there's a potential for something ... you always have to be cautious."

None the less, there have been no reports of incidents between bears and people in some time.

Both Mattamuskeet and Pungo have some areas closed off at certain times, and you might want to check their websites to get maps, brochures and other information before you go. You might also track them down on Google maps.

The contact for Lake Mattamuskeet is [www.fws.gov/mattamuskeet/](http://www.fws.gov/mattamuskeet/) and their number is 926-4021.

The contact for Pungo is [www.fws.gov/pocosinlakes/](http://www.fws.gov/pocosinlakes/) and their number is 796-3004.

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