

## TOPSAIL ISLAND; A WORLD OF BEAUTY



Does the ocean breeze tickle you? Do your feet enjoy crunching into the sand as soft waves draw up to lick them, just before pulling back into the ocean? Do you enjoy the sound of waves crashing against one another like a contest for the strongest? Topsail Island (“Topsül” as it is pronounced locally) is one of the masterpieces of nature. It is a 26-mile-long barrier island off the North Carolina coast and lies just northeast of Wilmington. This island is home to a diverse collection of fascinating creatures. If you are a sucker for beach vacations, plants, and wildlife, take out your pen this instant and scribble “Topsül” on your bucket list.

Topsail Island is a renowned haven for sea turtles. Sea turtles are its most famed residents, especially the Loggerhead sea turtles.



Loggerhead Turtle, Photo by Kostas Papafitsoros

Loggerheads are named for their enormous heads and strong jaws, powerful enough to crush an adult queen conch. The skin of their dorsum is beautifully covered in brown, cobblestone-like patches. Sadly, these turtles are gravely endangered due to poaching and exploitation. They have been killed for eggs, meat, skin, shells, etc. Their decline can also be attributed to worldwide habitat destruction and incidental capture by fishermen.

The Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center in Surf City, passionately serves to conserve and protect all species of marine turtles, both in the water and on the beach. They rescue sick or injured turtles, rehabilitate and then release them. They also provide public education on the plight of sea turtles, and learning opportunities for students of biology, wildlife conservation, and veterinary medicine from around the world.

If you're passionate about wildlife preservation and you can make a commitment of at least 4 months, feel free to volunteer at the Turtle Rescue Center. However, if you are here on a vacation or you just can't commit to that time, don't worry, you can still be of great help. Grabbing a beach rake to clean up the beach will go a long way. Stashing away that coke bottle rather than dumping it at the beach can save the baby turtles. You may even adopt a Loggerhead. We at Sea Vista Motel recently adopted two Loggerhead nests and were lucky enough to see the adorable hatchlings emerge from their shells.



Did you know that Sea turtles have existed on Earth and traveled the seas for the last 100 million years? Loggerheads can travel several thousand miles across oceans from their nesting beaches. Adelita, a large juvenile loggerhead

was the first sea turtle to be tracked by satellite across an entire ocean basin. She journeyed approximately 6500 miles from feeding areas off Baja California, Mexico, to coastal areas off Japan. A hatchling Loggerhead's odds of surviving to adulthood are a staggering 1 in 10,000 against! Sea turtles play important roles in marine ecosystems. They help in the maintenance of seagrass beds and coral reefs that, in turn, benefit valuable species like shrimp, lobster, and tuna.

Are there sharks at Topsail Island? Absolutely! How likely are you to get attacked by one? Not very likely at all; they may hardly find you tasty but it's worth learning about them if you will be surfing in this region. North Carolina's beaches are a major migration route for all marine animals including sharks. The most common species you may find around Topsail island would be the Sandbar sharks, the Blacknose sharks, the Hammerheads, and the Spinner sharks. Fortunately, these sharks are almost always harmless if treated with respect.



The Sandbar Shark by Ken Tam / Flickr. License: CC

The Sandbar sharks are the most common around Topsail Island. They love to hang around here and not just during their migrations. They appear large but despite their size, they are quite harmless and are often chosen to be

used in aquariums. Blacknose sharks are smaller with a black nose tip as the name implies. They spend more time close to the shores and sometimes even travel inland via inlets. Who knows what they hope to find here! The Spinner sharks are quite agile. They propel themselves out of the water by spinning and can go up to 20 feet above the water surface. The Hammerhead sharks are generally considered harmless to humans. They are quite intelligent—they're known to have high levels of cognition. This can probably be attributed to their unusually large head. *Ha!*



The Hammerhead Shark by Barry Peters, [CC BY 2.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

It's extremely rare to be attacked by a shark (11.5 million to 1 against!!!), however, be mindful of these tips to avoid shark attacks. First, don't swim at night, dawn, or dusk. Sharks are more active at these times, and they see perfectly in the dim light while you probably don't. Always look out for notices and signals from lifeguards or authorities. Be mindful of things that attract predators such as excessive splashing probably by pets, rapid motion in the water, and sparkly or shiny accessories like jewelry or rhinestones on swimwear as these can mimic fish scales. Finally, stay close to the shores and avoid swimming alone. If you stay mindful of these tips, you will further minimize the chances of a shark encounter, even if there is one nearby.



Cannonball Jellyfish by John Dreyer / Getty Images

Oh! Was that a Jellyfish? Yes, there's plenty of jellyfish around here so you may encounter one during your trip. Jellyfish season is early July to late August, when the waters get warm. The most common species are the Cannon Balls. They are cute, small and round, and they are pretty harmless. The other species you may encounter are the Lion's Manes, Moon jellies, Sea Nettles and Sea Wasps. The Lion's Manes are quite unique – they are the biggest (the largest known Lion's Mane stretched up to 120 feet in length in Australia) and are the only orange-colored jellyfish. The Moon jellies are transparent and can easily be missed. To spot them, look for the pink glands in the center. The Sea Nettles are large but nothing compared to the Lion's Manes. Spotting them can be tricky because they are semi-transparent and can blend into the surroundings. The reddish-brown stripes and small white dots are their notable features. The Sea Wasps are box jellyfish with a small transparent bell and long blueish tentacles that can reach up to 10 feet. At Topsail island, the Sea Wasps are relatively uncommon.

Getting stung by a jellyfish is possible but a sting from the jellyfish at Topsail may only cause slight discomfort. Interestingly, many times these stings are from dead jellyfish. You can avoid getting stung by wearing protective clothing like wetsuits and rashguards. Don't touch any part of a jellyfish tentacle even when they're dead. If you spot a bloom or a large cluster of jellyfish, just stay clear. If you get stung anyways and you feel uncomfortable, you can seek medical attention.

While there are many fantastic marine animals, Topsail Island doesn't fail to display eye-pleasing flora. The fire wheel is an iconic wildflower that's found all over the island. Like a diamond that's beautiful and strong, this flower is resilient – it blooms a wide span through the seasons, from early spring through late fall, sometimes even through the first ice. It's a real tough nut! The petals have a red base with yellow tips, making them look like little flames. It's a composite flower – its center comprises many tiny flowers so it attracts pollinators like bees and butterflies, to feed from the multiple nectar sources within it. *How generous!*



Topsail Island is a lovely vacation site. We've just chosen to sample a few creatures you might see on a vacation here. There are many other exciting

creatures to be in awe of. There are also many activities and tourist attractions to keep you bustling while you're here. We'll tell you more about them in the coming weeks. Enough talking now! Come visit us and see them for yourself.