

Getting Acquainted with the Croatan National Forest -- Hiking Trails, Special Areas

Be Careful During Hunting Season

Visitors to the Croatan should be very cautious during the rifle deer season which runs from mid-October (exact date varies each year) until January 1st. During this period, you may want to limit visits to Sundays (hunting is not allowed on Sundays). Also, there are several sites within the Croatan where hunting is always forbidden, as around the Forest Service campgrounds, and along the hiking trails at Patsy Pond, Cedar Point, Island Creek Forest Walk, etc. In the southern Croatan, as along Pringle and Millis roads, where deer numbers are relatively low, hunting activity is light, especially after the first week of the season. However, it is always wise to wear a bright orange cap and/or vest/jacket during the hunting season.

Other Cautions

Venomous snakes are not particularly common in the Croatan, but they do occur and are widely distributed. Species present are the timber (canebrake) rattlesnake, pigmy rattlesnake, copperhead, and cottonmouth. (The eastern diamondback rattlesnake formerly occurred, but may now be extirpated.) Be aware that most snakes are not aggressive and are likely to bite only when provoked. You can assure that you will not be bitten by a snake simply by observing the following: always watch where you step; wear heavy hiking shoes and long pants; and always be extremely careful if reaching down to pick up something from the ground. Snakes are not active in cold weather.

The tick-carried diseases Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and Lyme Disease are apparently rather rare in the Croatan region, but one should take precautions to repel ticks and should check frequently for them.

Resources

Extremely helpful is the official Forest Service map of the Croatan. This shows all the roads and major trails in the Forest, and clearly shows the Forest Service boundaries. This map is available from the Croatan District office, which is located on US 70 at the Riverdale community (about half way between New Bern and Havelock). (This same information is available in the popular North Carolina Atlas and Gazetteer, but the scale is more challenging and the Croatan boundaries are rather difficult to differentiate.)

Major Hiking Trails

The two major hiking trails of the Croatan are the 20+-mile **Neusiok Trail** in the eastern Croatan, and the approximately 10-mile **Weetock Trail** in the western Croatan. These two trails are maintained by the Carteret County Wildlife Club. The club's web site (www.clis.com/canoe2) has very helpful information about locating and following these trails.

Neusiok Trail

The Neusiok Trail runs from the Neuse River shoreline at the Pine Cliff Recreation Area down to the Newport River estuary at the Oyster Point (Duncan's Landing) Campground. In general, the trail is most enjoyable from late October into May. There are camp shelters at three different sites. Footbridges

have been constructed across the wettest sites along the trail. However, be advised that there are a few unbridged low areas on the section of trail between Alligator Tram Road (FSR 124) and Mill Creek Road that can be very wet after rainy periods.

Most persons would probably consider the **northernmost section of trail**—from Pine Cliff down to NC 306—to be the most appealing. Here the trail follows the Neuse River shoreline at first, and then later winds around the little tributaries of the Neuse River and Hancock and Cahoogue creeks. The topography is quite varied and there numerous prominent slopes with beech and other hardwood trees, making some sites look quite piedmont-like. Indeed, in some places there are thick patches of galax.

Off the beginning of the trail the Neuse River often harbors flocks of waterfowl in winter; these often include some surf scoters. Although bird-watching can be enjoyable any time from fall to spring, the peak birding is in late April and early May. Among those breeding birds that are easy to see then are red-eyed vireo, yellow-throated warbler, prothonotary warbler, ovenbird, wood thrush, and summer tanager. Turkeys are common along this section of trail. They are most likely to be spotted in the springtime, but might be seen at any time if you are quiet enough.

The **middle section of the trail**, from NC 306 down to a little S of Alligator Tram Road, might be considered the “pocosin section”. Characteristic of this section are extensive areas of pond pine growth (trees may be stunted or tall) with a dense undergrowth of various broadleaf evergreens such as fetterbush and gallberry. However, there are also slightly elevated, better-drained sites having large loblolly pines and/or longleaf pines.

From about NC 306 down to Billfinger Road (FSR 147), in May and early June you might notice a few goldenrods along the trail shoulders or in open pine areas that have been burned in the previous months. These are spring-flowering goldenrods, a Carolina endemic that occurs only in a few counties in southeastern North Carolina and extreme northeastern South Carolina.

The most productive birding along the middle section of trail is in April. During this time, species you will hear singing include white-eyed vireo, prairie warbler, worm-eating warbler, and common yellowthroat. After mid-April, listen along drains with dense shrub vegetation for the loud, ringing song of the Swainson’s warbler. If you look carefully, you are certain to see black bear scat—occasionally you might spot a bear.

The southernmost section of trail, from S of Alligator Tram Road to the Newport River, has slightly rolling topography, with numerous well-drained sites and tracts of loblolly and longleaf pines. Brown-headed nuthatches and pine warblers are common throughout the year. You may see a few trees marked with white paint. These are former cavity trees of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Sadly though, this species now appears to be totally extirpated from the eastern Croatan. As you approach the Newport River, the vegetation takes on an increasingly maritime flavor. Trees here include a few live oak and sand laurel oaks, and the understory vegetation includes yaupon and wild olives. The Newport River estuary can be good for birding at any season (see under *Oyster Point campground* below).

Weetock Trail

The 10+-mile-long Weetock Trail is located in the western Croatan, near the Haywood Landing boat ramp on the White Oak River. This trail almost makes a complete loop. Its beginning (or end) is where FSR 120 ends on NC 58. The trail's end (or beginning) is on NC 58, a little SE of FSR 603.

The Weetock winds along Holston Creek and its associated small tributaries; the borders of the White Oak River floodplain; and along Hunter's Creek and its associated small tributaries. Much of the trail is quite scenic with a rolling topography, somewhat reminiscent of the piedmont. Along the trail are many prominent slopes with mature pines and hardwoods. Other habitats along the trail include beaverponds, floodplain swamps, and a few managed wildlife fields.

Walking the trail is most enjoyable from the first cool days of autumn until about early June. This western end of the Croatan is generally the most wind-sheltered portion. On winter days that are windy, keep the Weetock in mind—conditions here are likely to be more benign than at most Croatan sites.

Along and in the vicinity of the Weetock, there are a few rare plant species and several others that, although not truly rare, are rare in the outer coastal plain. Three rare/locally rare orchids that occur near the trail, if not adjacent to it, are the shadow-witch, Florida adder's-mouth, and green fringed orchid. The first two of these are Southerners—they reach their northern limit in southeastern Virginia. The green fringed orchid is more typical of the mountains and piedmont; it is rare in the outer coastal plain. This area can be worth visiting about mid-April just to see the display of wild azaleas. Look especially where the trail crosses the road near Haywood Landing.

For bird-watching, the trail can be fun from late fall until at least early June, although the breeding season has the most variety. Spring starts early here. By the end of March, blue-gray gnatcatchers, yellow-throated warblers, black-and-white warblers, and northern parulas will be easy to find. The peak of the breeding season is about late April-early May, when a long list of summer resident species can be found. Common species include prothonotary warbler, wood thrush, Acadian flycatcher, and summer tanager. This is an area where you might get to hear two species with confusingly similar songs together—Swainson's warbler and Louisiana waterthrush.

Brisk, sunny days in winter can also be a lot of fun. With its many large trees, the area hosts good numbers of woodpeckers, and you should have little trouble seeing pileated and hairy. This is an area where a few red-headed woodpeckers, which are most common in the breeding season, can usually be found throughout the winter as well. Easy to find are hermit thrushes and small flocks of fox sparrows. In the wettest areas, watch carefully for rusty blackbirds, a declining species.

The trail runs by/through a couple of large managed wildlife fields. During clear weather, especially if there's a bit of wind, these can be good spots to spend some time watching the skies for raptors, such as vultures and red-tailed and red-shouldered hawks, maybe a bald eagle. About late April and May, Mississippi kites have been seen in this area, and the sighting of a swallow-tailed, although rare, would be possible as well.

Relatively Short Nature Trails

Within the Croatan are four nature/walking trails maintained by the Forest Service. These are the Island Creek Forest Walk in the northern Croatan, a nature trail at the Flanners Beach Recreation Area

on the Neuse River, the Cedar Point Tideland Trail at the Cedar Point Campground Area in the southwestern Croatan, and the Patsy Pond Nature Trail, located by NC 24 in the south Croatan.

Island Creek Forest Walk

The trail is located next to the Island Creek Road, about 5 miles NE of Pollocksville. Look for the little parking area on the north side of the road.

This area is truly unique and is thoroughly delightful much of the year, the only exceptions being in mid and late summer when it can be rather buggy. The geology of this area—in which coquina limestone occurs near the ground surface and even exposed in places along the creek—makes this area quite special. When walking the trail it is easy to forget that you're in the outer coastal plain. With its rich variety of hardwood trees, many of impressive size, it seems like you're in the piedmont. This area harbors several rare plants, and many others that, although not rare overall, are very rare in the outer coastal plain, being more typical of the mountains and piedmont. Try to make a visit in late March, when the bloodroot, may-apple, columbine, and liverleaf are in flower. Another time for a visit is fall—with its variety of hardwoods, there can be some nice leaf color about late October. Birdingwise, the area is most entertaining from mid-April into May. In addition to the summer residents, look for migrants like black-throated blue warbler, scarlet tanager, and rose-breasted grosbeak. Winter, when the hardwoods are mostly leafless, is great for seeing woodpeckers and other resident landbirds. During some winters, you might spot a few purple finches in the treetops.

Flanners Beach Recreation Area and Nature Trail

This recreation area, with picnic areas and campground, lies adjacent to the Neuse River estuary. On the SE side of the recreation area (to your right as you're entering the area) is a nature trail that runs along upland slopes and includes a boardwalk that crosses a swamp forest swale adjacent to the Neuse. With its mixture of mature pines and hardwoods, and both upland and swamp forest habitats, the recreation area and trail area are productive for bird-watching at any season, although the peak time for variety is about late April-early May. Among species that can be found throughout the year are several kinds of woodpeckers, white-breasted and brown-headed nuthatches, and eastern bluebird. Species easy to find in the breeding season include eastern wood-pewee, Acadian flycatcher, yellow-throated vireo, and summer tanager.

Where the boardwalk crosses the swamp forest swale, you may notice that many of the gum trees have relatively large leaves (that are whitish underneath) and have relatively large fruits. These are water tupelos. This species is rare over most of the Croatan (unlike the common swamp tupelo), being mostly restricted to a few swales that connect to the Neuse River (and are flooded from the river occasionally).

If you were to stay in the campground overnight, you would be likely to see a screech-owl swoop by around dusk. They apparently like to feed in this area. Other nocturnal species that may be heard here are the barred owl and chuck-will's-widow. The barred owl might be heard in the nearby swamps at any season. The chucks, which may be heard calling adjacent to the campground, call mostly from about mid-April to early July.

Beginning at the northwest end of the picnic area (to your left as you face the river), a small footpath runs upriver (eventually to the mouth of Otter Creek, although the path becomes increasingly poorly

defined the further you go). The beginning of the path is hard to find; it lies right next to the last picnic table, and is partially obscured by hanging branches. About 500' down the path, there is a small boardwalk. This area hosts a rare skipper—the Dukes' skipper (a type of small butterfly), about June and again from early August through mid-September. If you don't see them here, continue on down the path until you see similar habitat (wet with open stands of hardwoods and having a dense ground cover of sedges). (In this area, watch your step—this is pretty good cottonmouth habitat.)

In the Neuse River off the recreation area, there are usually large rafts of diving ducks in winter, from about Thanksgiving until early April. These are almost all ruddy ducks, but you should also see lesser scaup, and, if you look carefully and patiently, perhaps one or more other species, like canvasback, redhead, and surf and black scoters. (Note: the recreation area is closed for a period in winter, but you can park at the gate and walk in.)

Patsy Pond Nature Trail

This trail is located adjacent to NC 24, directly across from the North Carolina Coastal Federation office, between the communities of Broad Creek and Ocean. Watch for the little parking area.

The Patsy Pond Trail is managed in conjunction with the North Carolina Coastal Federation. See their web site for an online brochure with a map showing the two trail loops. (Go to www.nccoast.org and click on "Education", and then "Public Education".)



Brown-headed Nuthatch. These feisty and inquisitive little birds can be found along the Patsy Pond Trail throughout the year.

This area is special because of the concentration of natural limesink ponds, including a small one that suddenly formed right next to the trailhead about 2002! For the botanist, this is a fascinating area, as it contains numerous rare species and several species that are at or near their northern limits. To get the most out of this area, visit between late April and October, and be prepared to leave the trails and spend some time following the margins of the ponds. (It is easy to get turned around in this area, but you can always hear the highway traffic on NC 24.) Some of the rare species found here include the pondspice (a shrub that is almost exclusively restricted to limesink ponds), West Indies meadow-beauty,

and the flaxleaf seedbox. Many rare species are rather inconspicuous and would be noticed by only the most intense botanists. These include the dwarf bladderwort, which may be the smallest flowering plant in the world. Their tiny flowers look like little specks in the water.

The endangered red-cockaded woodpecker breeds in this area and can be found at any season. Look for white paint around their cavity trees. (The red-cockaded woodpecker always nests in pines and is the only woodpecker that nests in living trees.) Another specialty, the Bachman's sparrow, is likely to be found in this particular area only during the first year following prescribed burning.

Cedar Point Tideland Trail

This trail lies adjacent to the Cedar Point Campground and boat ramp next to the White Oak River, near the town of Cape Carteret. Watch for signs on nearby NC 58.

Habitats found along this trail—which has two loops—are tidal marshes and maritime shrub thickets. At any season, several types of waterbirds—such as herons and egrets—can be seen. Patient watching from the boardwalks may yield a view of a clapper rail skulking along (or maybe making a short flight during high tides). In the opinion of many birders, the most special bird that might be seen along the trail is the summer resident painted bunting. They are most likely to be found from about mid-April to early June, when they frequently give their scratchy, warbly song; however, one might be encountered as late as October. This area is often entertaining after cold fronts in fall, when landbird migrants may congregate. The trail and adjacent area is a very good place to see red-headed woodpeckers. They occur mainly during the warmer months, but a few occur in winter as well.

The nearby campground is a good place to observe a fox squirrel. This large squirrel is generally uncommon in the Croatan (although it has been gradually increasing in several areas in response to more frequent prescribed burning—which creates the open savanna conditions these animals prefer).

Other Croatan sites worth checking out

Of course, there is no need to limit yourself to any officially designated trail to enjoy the natural history of the National Forest. There are hundreds of miles of roads and “unofficial” trails to explore. Some sites worth special mention follow.

Catfish Lake Impoundments

This site is definitely off the beaten path. From the Catfish Lake Road, take FSR 158 (which runs right by Catfish Lake) northwestward. Short walks along spur roads (from FSR 158) are required to get to the actual impoundments (see the Croatan map). During the duck hunting season, avoid periods when duck hunting is allowed (Tuesday, Saturdays, and holidays from dawn until 1pm).

Contrary to what you might expect, these impoundments are not good for seeing a variety or large numbers of waterfowl most of the time. Reportedly, there are times when many ducks may be seen right before the main hunting season starts (about Thanksgiving); it would seem that this might happen again after the season, in February. Actually, many waterfowl do use the impoundments much of the winter period, BUT only for roosting, and they typically fly out before dawn and don't return until dusk. Most of the ducks that use this area are wood ducks. If you were to stay here until dusk, you are certain to hear their loud “oo-eek” calls. You might also see an American bittern making a short flight, and,

especially if winds are light, you might hear the “peenting” of woodcocks overhead and the grunting calls of Virginia rails in the impoundments.

At any season, this site is good for raptor watching. In winter, species you may see include harrier, sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper’s hawk, and merlin. Bald eagles are a possibility at any season.

About July and early August, thousands of purple martins may congregate here prior to their southward migration. Other types of wildlife that might be seen include bear and river otter, and, during the warmer months, perhaps an alligator.

The nearby **Catfish Lake** is quite acidic with few fish; thus you will see few waterbirds here, most likely great blue herons and double-crested cormorants, with an occasional common loon or two during migration. This site is more noteworthy for its breeding landbirds. From April into May, you can find a nice variety of warblers, and along the roadsides they can be easy to see. This is probably the best site in the Croatan for finding the secretive Swainson’s warbler.



Swainson’s warbler. Shiest of the Croatan’s breeding warblers, the Swainson’s is found at wet sites having a thick undergrowth of broadleaf evergreens.

Little Road Area

Little Road (FSR 121), which lies SW of and roughly parallels US 70, can be accessed from the Catfish Lake Road. The southern portion of the road, S of Catfish Lake Road, is gated throughout the year and can provide a nice walk through longleaf pine and pocosin habitats.

The Little Road area provides a nice variety of habitats, including areas of longleaf pine, pocosin vegetation (mostly S of Catfish Lake Road), swamp forests, slopes with mixed pines and hardwoods, and power line corridors having a rich variety of savanna herbs, including orchids and some carnivorous species.

This is a very popular deer hunting area—in the hunting season, you may want to visit only on Sundays. This part of the Croatan is also popular with turkey hunters in the spring; however, if you stay on the roads, this is not an issue.

The **little bridge across the SW Prong of Brices Creek** (at 1.4 mile N of Catfish Lake Road) can be a great place to greet the dawn. At any season, you might spot a barred owl. In the breeding season,

prothonotary warblers can't be missed and this is a very good place for seeing Acadian flycatchers. If you look carefully along the cypress knees at the edge of the creek, you might spot a cottonmouth.

In winter, large numbers of wood ducks often roost in the adjacent swamps. If you are here at dawn's first light, you may hear them overhead as they're heading out for the day. At this season, you can find a surprising variety of small landbirds on nice mornings—including both kinglets, white-breasted and brown-headed nuthatches, several woodpeckers, brown creeper, etc. One winter resident that's impossible to miss here is the winter wren; there are always 2 or 3 lurking around the stumps and fallen trees in the swamp.

As noted above, the **southernmost section of Little Road** can be great for a hike (or a bicycle tour), one where the sounds of nature are not drowned out by autos. This walk is perhaps most enjoyable from about mid-April into May. At that time, gray catbirds, prairie warblers, and common yellowthroats are abundant and conspicuous. You should see carnivorous plants—pitcherplants, sundews, and bladderworts—and wild orchids (like the rosebud orchid). If you don't see many carnivorous plants along the road shoulders, be sure to walk into the power line corridor just S of Catfish Lake Road.

Power line corridors can be great places for seeing nice displays of savanna wildflowers. The periodic mowing (about every 3 years) simulates natural ground fires; in fact, some of the most "natural" ground covers in the northern and central parts of the Croatan are sites in power line corridors.

One particularly interesting section of the power line corridor that parallels Little Road is the **section that is about 2.5 miles N of Catfish Lake Road** (this section does not lie immediately next to Little Road but can be easily seen from it). This section of power line corridor has a suite of loamy soil savanna species that are absent or rare in most of the remaining high-quality pine savannas in the southern Croatan. Examples of such species are yellow fringeless orchid, Hooker's milkwort, scale-leaf gerardia, and LeConte's thistle. Remember that the best displays of flowers will be during the first growing season that follows a fire or a mowing event.

The **power line corridors just N and S of Catfish Lake Road** can also be great for savanna wildflowers and they have a variety of carnivorous plants—pitcher plants, sundews, and bladderworts. These sites can also be great for a variety of butterflies. One special butterfly is the Berry's skipper, a rare species that is not likely to be found elsewhere in the Croatan.



Pair of Berry's skippers copulating. This little butterfly is rare throughout its range. In the Croatan, it is likely to be found only in power line corridors near Little Road.

Oyster Point (Duncan's Landing) Campground and vicinity

This site, which is located next to the Newport River estuary at the end of FSR 181, can be fun at any season. Around the campground, birds that can be found almost any time include brown-headed nuthatch, eastern bluebird, pine warbler, and eastern towhee. From mid-April into June, listen in the thick vegetation along the river side of the campground for one or two painted buntings. If you stay at the campground between mid-April and early July, you will certainly hear chuck-will's-widows. In July and August, look along the borders of FSR 181 and FSR 183 for mallows. These particular mallows are the savanna mallow, a Southern species that does not occur north of Carteret County. Note that this particular mallow's leaves look quite different from the leaves of our other native mallows.

The mud flats of the Newport River estuary adjacent to the campground can be great for a variety of wading birds (herons, egrets, and ibises), shorebirds (like oystercatchers and dunlins), and other waterbirds at just about any season, but only at low tide. (Sometimes in September and October, the tides do not become low enough to attract many birds.) This is a good spot for seeing a bald eagle; indeed, you might get to see an eagle robbing (or attempting to rob) an osprey of its fish. If you check this site early in the morning when no one else is around, you might be treated to the sight of a family of frolicking otters.

Millis, Pringle, and Dudley roads

Many biologists would consider that the most interesting and appealing portion of the Croatan is the southern portion—for instance, many of the areas bordering Millis Road (FSR 128), Pringle Road (FSR 123), and Dudley Road (FSR 201, FSR 617). Here are the types of habitats that many biologists instantly think of when they hear the word "Croatan"—pine savannas and pocosins. Further, this area harbors both Federally endangered species found in the Croatan—red-cockaded woodpecker, pocosin loosestrife—and it is the portion of the Croatan having the largest number of rare species. The southern Croatan contains most of the best examples of pine savanna remaining in the Croatan, especially in regard to the extent of remaining wiregrass.

The Millis-Pringle-Dudley road area is most interesting for natural history buffs in the warmer months, any time from the first warm days of February (when the first spring bartonias emerge) until about October. However, clear and cold winter days can be great for exploring further afield.

A good way to get the most out of this area is to do a reconnaissance drive about April and note what areas have been burned over recently. Then store this information in your mental notebook for the rest of the growing season. These burned-over sites will offer the most potential for the coming months. Note especially where burned areas include ecotonal strips, i.e. where the longleaf pine savannas merge with the wetter pocosin vegetation. It is along these ecotonal strips—which offer the combination of wet conditions and predominantly herbaceous vegetation—where there is the greatest potential for seeing rare plants. (Note: avoid areas where loblolly pine plantations were established in the past. These areas, which usually exhibit bedded rows, have much less potential for rare species, although there are a few exceptions.)

Although there are many sites along these roads which are of potential interest, the four below deserve special mention:

Millis Road Savanna (Also see the section on “The Wildfire of Summer 2009)

This site lies along the the south side of Millis Road, about 1.4 to 2.4 miles W of the Nine Mile Road. It stands out as having a very open aspect with a thick grass cover, except for the low thick strips of pocosin vegetation that are embedded within the site.

The east end of the savanna is the best-quality portion. An old jeep trail (gated where it comes out to Millis Road) provides a good walkway back into this area.

The savanna has a component of rather mature longleaf pines, up to about 100 years old. (On poorer soils, tree size is not a good indicator of age.) These older trees provide cavity trees for several red-cockaded woodpeckers, which are easy to find throughout the year.

This area is also notable for its exceptional wiregrass cover. (The highly flammable wiregrass is a keystone species—one that is integral to maintenance of the habitat.) Because of the wiregrass abundance, this is also an excellent site for the Bachman’s sparrow, a declining species. They can always be found during the warmer months, and also occur during winters that follow burning of the site. And after burns, a few Henslow’s sparrow (another rare species) may overwinter here. (Note that this species is super-secretive and difficult to flush.)

To see Venus flytraps and other carnivorous plants, walk the jeep trail southwestward to where it eventually peters out, about one-half mile from Millis Road. Here look along the border where open pine savanna meets the pocosin. After a recent burn, the flytraps may be conspicuous, but, if there has been no fire for a few years, they may be stunted and easily overlooked among the competing vegetation.

Two butterfly species worthy of note are the arogos skipper and the little metalmark. The arogos skipper is quite remarkable. Millis Road Savanna may be the only place in North Carolina where this rare and declining species still occurs (but also see “The Wildfire of Summer 2009”). It is best looked for about late August and early September. Although generally scarce in North Carolina, the little metalmark is actually rather common at Millis Road. It is also easy to identify. Look for it especially in late August and September.



Hairy chaffhead. Especially following burns, sections of the Millis Road Savanna may erupt in lavender in late summer-early fall, with much hairy chaffhead (shown here) and vanilla-plant.

Millis Road East

Millis Road East lies a little to the E of Millis Road Savanna. Look for a gated jeep trail on the S side of Millis Road about 1.1 mile (or a little more) from Nine Mile Road.

This site has many of the characteristics of the better known Millis Road Savanna, including presence of mature longleaf pines and a good cover of wiregrass. Thus, it is another good area for finding red-cockaded woodpeckers and Bachman's sparrows. It seems to be a better area for seeing fox squirrels, another longleaf pine specialty. Nevertheless, you will more often miss them than see them.

At this site, it is a shorter walk to ecotones harboring Venus flytraps and other carnivorous plants. For the shortest walk, head directly south from the jeep trail gate. The distance is about one-quarter mile.

Pringle Road

Most of this road can be entertaining for savanna specialties. However, the best section is probably the almost-straight, mile-long stretch that is approximately the middle section of the road. (This section begins about 1.5 mile N of NC 24.) Along this section, ecotones harboring rare plants are just a few feet off the road, and lie along both sides of the road. Note that both sides are not burned by the Forest Service during the same year, but are alternated. Thus, during a given year there is a 2/3 chance that one side of the road will have been burned during the previous months and will be at its best for botanizing.

Common along the ecotones (on both sides) are Venus flytraps (and other carnivorous species) and the endangered pocosin loosestrife. Both species are in peak flower about June 1. The loosestrife has whorls of distinctive lance-shaped leaves and a raceme of yellow flowers.

One especially noteworthy carnivorous plant that may be seen is the tiny dwarf butterwort. Most of the time, there are none to be seen. But, at sites where the ground has been "scorched" by recent burns, thousands may appear about April. Note that this species is at its northern limit in the southern Croatan.

Dudley Road

This area is an excellent example of the fact that "not all savannas are created equal". By that, we mean that this pine savanna hosts a somewhat different suite of herbaceous savanna species (from most sites along Millis and Pringle roads) because of differences in soil types (more loamy at this site).

A walk northward from the end of FSR 617 can be especially productive. Rare species—ones that are usually associated with loamy soils—are Hooker's milkwort, LeConte's thistle, and bog bluestem.

In spite of the differences noted above, this area is nevertheless dominated by longleaf pine and wiregrass. It is also a good area for seeing red-cockaded woodpeckers and Bachman's sparrows.



LeConte's thistle. This rare native thistle is near its northern limit in the Croatan.