

# North Carolina: Pelagics & Pine Savannas Itinerary

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## Tour Overview

The **North Carolina: Pelagics & Pine Savannas** birding tour combines some of the Southeast's most distinctive birding experiences, from the barrier islands of the Outer Banks and legendary Gulf Stream waters to grasslands and longleaf pine savannas of the Coastal Plain.

We'll spend two full days venturing offshore from Oregon Inlet, where the warm waters of the Gulf Stream and edge of the continental shelf create some of the finest pelagic birding in North America. Black-capped Petrel is a headline target, alongside Cory's, Great and Sargasso Shearwaters and Wilson's and Band-rumped Storm-Petrels. Bridled Tern and other offshore specialties are also possible, while Short-finned Pilot Whales, Atlantic Spotted Dolphins and other marine life add another dimension to our days at sea.

Back on land, we'll explore the beaches, marshes and wetlands of the Outer Banks, searching for coastal specialties such as Wilson's and Piping Plovers, American Oystercatcher and a variety of terns and other shorebirds. Pea Island and the Oregon Inlet area provide particularly diverse coastal birding.

Continuing into North Carolina's Coastal Plain, we'll visit grasslands supporting Henslow's Sparrow before exploring the longleaf pine savannas and forests of Croatan National Forest. Here we'll search for Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman's Sparrow and Brown-headed Nuthatch, along with a rich selection of southeastern breeding birds.

From petrels over the Gulf Stream to secretive marsh birds and the specialties of North Carolina's longleaf pine forests, this tour showcases an impressive diversity of southeastern birdlife.

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## Itinerary

### Day 1: Norfolk, Virginia

Our North Carolina: Pelagics & Pine Savannas birding tour begins in Norfolk, Virginia. We'll meet that evening at the hotel for a welcome dinner, where we'll get to know one another and discuss the exciting week of birding ahead. Night: Norfolk, Virginia.

## Day 2: Norfolk to the Outer Banks



After breakfast, we'll make our way south to North Carolina's famous Outer Banks, a remarkable chain of barrier islands stretching along the Atlantic coast. We'll spend much of the day exploring coastal habitats around Bodie Island, Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge and Oregon Inlet. Beaches, saltmarshes, impoundments and tidal flats provide opportunities for American Oystercatcher, Black Skimmer, Least, Gull-billed and Royal Terns, Wilson's Plover and Seaside Sparrow, along with a variety of herons, egrets and shorebirds. Pea Island is particularly rich in waterbirds, while the varied habitats around Oregon Inlet can attract shorebirds, terns and other coastal species. By late afternoon, we'll settle into our hotel in Nags Head, conveniently located for our next two days of pelagic birding. Night: Nags Head.

## Day 3: Gulf Stream Pelagic



Today is the first of our two back-to-back pelagic trips! We'll be up before dawn and make the short drive to Oregon Inlet, where we'll board our boat for a full day exploring the productive offshore waters of North Carolina. The warm waters of the Gulf Stream and the edge of the continental shelf make this one of the premier locations for pelagic birding in North America. Black-capped Petrel is a headline target, alongside Cory's, Great and Audubon's Shearwaters and Wilson's Storm-Petrel, while Band-rumped Storm-Petrel and Bridled Tern are other exciting possibilities. These waters are also famous for producing unexpected birds, so we'll keep a constant watch for rarities. Marine mammals and other wildlife can add to the excitement, with Short-finned Pilot Whale, Atlantic Spotted Dolphin and Common Bottlenose Dolphin among the possibilities. After a full day offshore, we'll return to Oregon Inlet in the late afternoon and enjoy dinner before doing it all again tomorrow. Night: Nags Head.

## Day 4: Gulf Stream Pelagic



We'll return to Oregon Inlet early this morning for our second full day offshore. Conditions on the ocean can change considerably from one day to the next, and changes in wind, currents and water temperature can bring a very different selection of seabirds within reach. We'll have another opportunity to search for the regular Gulf Stream specialties while remaining alert for something unexpected. Having two consecutive days offshore greatly increases our opportunities to experience the diversity and unpredictability that make North Carolina pelagic birding so exciting. We'll return to shore in the late afternoon and celebrate our adventures over dinner. Night: Nags Head.

## Day 5: Hatteras Island & the Outer Banks



After two early starts and long days offshore, we'll enjoy a more relaxed morning before spending the day exploring the Outer Banks. Our plans will remain flexible, allowing us to concentrate on the most productive areas based on recent sightings and conditions. We plan to make our way south along Hatteras Island, with possible stops at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, Cape Hatteras National Seashore, Cape Point and other coastal birding sites. Beaches, tidal flats, saltmarshes and impoundments provide opportunities for breeding shorebirds and terns, including American Oystercatcher, Wilson's Plover, Least Tern and Black Skimmer. We'll also keep a careful watch for the much scarcer Piping Plover. This flexible day gives us another chance to enjoy the distinctive birdlife and landscapes of the Outer Banks before we leave the coast tomorrow. Night: Nags Head.

## Day 6: Outer Banks to the Crystal Coast



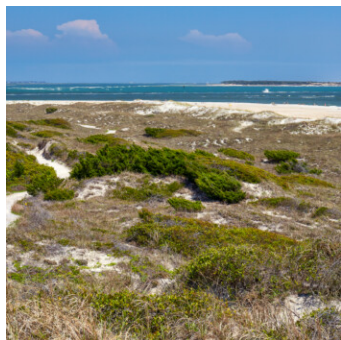
We'll leave Nags Head this morning and travel inland toward North Carolina's Coastal Plain. Along the way, we'll make some stops along the way to hopefully find Henslow's Sparrow. Grasshopper Sparrow and other grassland and edge species may also be encountered. After our morning birding, we'll continue toward Morehead City and Atlantic Beach, arriving with time for lunch and some relaxed afternoon birding in the surrounding area. Night: Morehead City/Atlantic Beach.

## Day 7: Croatan National Forest



Today we'll explore the diverse habitats of Croatan National Forest. Extensive longleaf pine forests, pocosins, wetlands and hardwoods support a distinctive community of southeastern birds. Our primary targets in the open pinewoods will include Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman's Sparrow and Brown-headed Nuthatch. As we explore other habitats, we'll search for species such as Swainson's, Prothonotary, Worm-eating and Kentucky Warblers, Acadian Flycatcher, Northern Bobwhite, Blue Grosbeak and Painted Bunting. We'll spend the day moving between habitats according to bird activity and our success with the various specialties. After dinner, we may have an optional evening excursion to some coastal marshes to listen for Chuck-will's-widow and other nocturnal birds and possibly the secretive Black Rail. The outing will depend on weather and local conditions. Night: Morehead City/Atlantic Beach.

## Day 8: Fort Macon & Return to Norfolk



We'll begin our final full day with birding around Fort Macon State Park and nearby coastal habitats. The park's beaches, dunes, maritime vegetation and surrounding waters offer another selection of coastal birds and give us an opportunity to look for anything we may have missed earlier in the tour. Depending on our previous successes and current bird activity, we may also revisit another nearby site before beginning our journey north to Norfolk. We'll gather that evening for a final dinner and recap some of the highlights of our journey. Night: Norfolk, Virginia.

## Day 9: Departure

Our North Carolina: Pelagics & Pine Savannas birding tour concludes today. Transfers to the airport and flights home can be arranged according to individual schedules.

## What to Expect

### Overview

This is a moderately paced tour combining two full days of pelagic birding with exploration of the Outer Banks and the longleaf pine savannas and forests of North Carolina's Coastal Plain. Participants should be prepared for several early starts (5am) and some long days (10-12 hours on pelagic), particularly during our two long days at sea.

### Accommodation

We stay in comfortable hotels throughout the tour. Hotels are comfortable and provide private bathrooms and standard amenities.

### Food

Breakfasts will generally be at our hotels or at nearby restaurants, although early starts may occasionally require a packed or takeaway breakfast (especially during our pelagic days). Lunches will often be taken in the field or at convenient stops during the day. Dinners will normally be at local restaurants.

### Walking

Walking on this tour is generally easy and over flat terrain. Most birding involves short walks along beaches, boardwalks, trails, forest roads and other relatively level surfaces. We may occasionally walk on sand or uneven forest trails, but there are no strenuous hikes or significant elevation changes. The pace will generally be dictated by bird activity, and we will spend considerable time standing while watching and listening for birds.

### Driving

There are a few longer drives, particularly between Norfolk and the Outer Banks and on our return to Norfolk at the end of the tour. Much of our travel between birding sites involves shorter drives with frequent stops.

### Climate/Weather

Early June in coastal North Carolina is typically warm and humid, with daytime temperatures generally around 24-29°C (75-85°F) and overnight and early-morning temperatures around 18-23°C

(65–73°F). Temperatures can occasionally climb above 30°C (86°F), particularly inland in the pine savannas.

Conditions offshore can feel significantly cooler than the temperature suggests because of wind and spray, especially during the early-morning run out to the Gulf Stream. Participants should bring a warm layer and windproof or waterproof outer layer for the pelagic trips even when warm conditions are forecast.

Strong sunshine and high humidity are common at this time of year, while showers and thunderstorms are also possible. Lightweight, breathable clothing, sun protection and rain gear are recommended. Mosquitoes, ticks and other biting insects may be encountered in forested and wetland habitats, so insect repellent and appropriate clothing are also advisable.

### **Boat Trips**

Two full-day pelagic trips out of Nags Head are a major focus of this tour. We will depart very early in the morning and may spend 10–12 hours on the water each day, travelling well offshore to reach the productive waters of the Gulf Stream. Sea conditions can vary considerably, and participants should be comfortable spending long periods aboard a moving vessel. Those susceptible to seasickness should come prepared with appropriate preventative measures.

All pelagic trips are weather and sea-condition dependent. Safety is the first priority, and the captain will make the final decision on whether conditions are suitable to go offshore. Trips may be delayed, altered or cancelled if winds, seas or other conditions make it unsafe to operate. If a pelagic trip cannot run, we will make the most of the day with alternative land-based birding where possible.

There is some protection from the elements aboard the boat, but participants should be prepared for sun, wind, spray and changing temperatures.

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## **What's Included**

### **Tour Price Includes**

- 2 full-day pelagic tours
- Good quality accommodation
- Includes all meals
- 4 - 8 participants with one guide, 9 - 12 participants with two guides and two vehicles
- Gratuities for pelagic tour
- All park, conservation and entrance fees

### **Tour Price Does Not Include**

- Flights to and from start of tour
  - Travel Insurance
  - Alcoholic beverages
  - Items of a personal nature
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