

# ALLIGATOR RIVER ROUTE

The Alligator River Route allows motorists to explore some of coastal North Carolina's most rural areas as it travels through expansive wetlands and open farmlands.

**From the byway's southern end, at the intersection of U.S. 264 and N.C. 94 in the Hyde County community of New**

**Holland, follow N.C. 94 North across Lake Mattamuskeet**, a 50,000-acre natural freshwater lake. Discovered in 1585, this lake is the largest natural lake in North Carolina. Its name is derived from the American Indian word for "moving swamp" or "shallow lake," which is appropriate given its maximum depth of only five feet.

Attempts have been made over the years to drain the lake to create farmlands, but they have failed because the lake sits just three feet below sea level. Mattamuskeet's old pumping plant is now used as an observation tower to view wildlife. The N.C. 94 causeway spans nearly six miles across the lake and offers an opportunity to view migratory birds throughout the year. Located along the Atlantic flyway, the Mattamuskeet National

Wildlife Refuge borders the lake's shores and provides waterfowl a safe haven.

Fairfield, located on the north shore of Lake Mattamuskeet, was incorporated in 1885. It was named for the "fair fields" of reclaimed swampland located nearby.

**Five miles north of Fairfield the byway crosses**

**the Intracoastal Waterway**, which follows the length of the Eastern Seaboard. Construction of the waterway began as early as 1856 and was completed during the 1940s.

**Just north of the Intracoastal Waterway, the byway crosses the Alligator River into Tyrrell County.**

Seven miles west of this point is Alligator Lake, known locally as New Lake. Named around 1624, the lake covers 3.5 square miles and drains surrounding swamplands. The Alligator River and N.C. 94 follow a parallel path for the next nine miles. **The byway crosses the west fork of the Alligator River about one mile south of Gumneck Road** (S.R. 1321), which appropriately leads to the community of Gum Neck.

**The byway then passes Frying Pan**



Lake Mattamuskeet

NCDOT

**Road (S.R. 1307), located 7.5 miles north of Gumneck Road**, which leads to the community of Frying Pan Landing, named for an unusually shaped bay along the Alligator River. The flat lands at this point on the byway comprise part of the Hollow Ground Swamp. Some of these lands were claimed through a former process called “swamp busting” to create farmlands. Now prohibited, the process had allowed landowners to drain swamps by constructing canals and drainage ways to direct the water away from the fertile soil.

**Columbia, the Tyrell County seat, is located seven miles north of Frying Pan Road.** Columbia was founded in the early 1700s as a trading post on the Scuppernong River. **At the traffic light in Columbia at U.S. 64, continue straight. At the next block, turn right onto U.S. 64 Business and drive through downtown. Turn left onto U.S. 64 and continue east.**

An area of straight marsh or slough named the Big Savannah covers the area from Columbia to Alligator, a community eight miles down the byway. The canal alongside U.S. 64 was constructed to provide drainage for the highway. Alligator Creek (which is not visible from the route) flows east as it parallels the road to the north. **From Alligator, travel five miles to the Alligator River.** While crossing the river, look left. In the distance is where the Alligator River enters the Albemarle Sound. The 2.7-mile bridge is an active drawbridge, so be prepared to stop.

**Across the river, the byway enters Dare County** and the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge was

established to protect a unique pocosin habitat and restore wetlands for native and endangered species. Look carefully for wildlife in and near the drainage canal alongside the highway. **The community of East Lake is one mile from the bridge. From here, continue 13 miles through the swamp to the intersection of U.S. 64 and U.S. 264. Turn left and follow U.S. 64 for 1.5 miles to the stop sign.**

**Turn left again onto U.S. 64 and drive through the fishing village of Mann’s Harbor**, settled in the 19th century and named for a German fishing captain who sheltered here during a storm. Note the tiny white frame post office on the right while traveling through the community before crossing the Croatan Sound on U.S. 64 to Roanoke Island.

The Croatan Sound, named for an American Indian tribe, connects the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds by way of the bridge. **Roanoke Island was the site of the first English settlement in the United States, located one mile after the bridge at the Fort Raleigh National Monument and Elizabethan Gardens, where the byway ends.** This English settlement, sponsored in part by Sir Walter Raleigh for Queen Elizabeth I, was established in 1587. By 1590, it had vanished. During the summer months, visitors may see productions of “The Lost Colony,” an outdoor drama about this settlement.

Visitors may also want to visit the *Elizabeth II* at Roanoke Island Festival Park in Manteo, just down the road. Representative of the type of ship used during the 1585 voyage to Roanoke, the

*Elizabeth II* is a living museum of the 16th century and is located on Shallowbag Bay. For those interested in marine life, visit the N.C. Aquarium on Roanoke Island, also in Manteo.



**Length: 71 miles**  
**Drive Time: 1.5 hours**  
**Counties: Hyde, Tyrrell and Dare**

Other points of interest may be found elsewhere along the Outer Banks, including the Wright Brothers National Memorial and Jockeys Ridge State Park, the largest active sand dune on the East Coast. Other nearby scenic byways include the Roanoke Voyages Corridor (pg. 137), Outer Banks Scenic Byway (pg. 139) that runs south from Nags Head along N.C. 12 to Beaufort, and the Pamlico Scenic Byway (pg. 130) that travels from U.S. 264 to Washington.

