

## Taking a winter walk on Fire Island

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The concession stands on Fire Island are shuttered, and ice has sludged up around the dock pilings on Bellport Bay. On the Atlantic side, fox tracks crisscross flat beaches that end in crumbling miniature cliffs sculpted by wind and waves.

To walk Fire Island in winter is to move among the ghosts of the barrier beach.

Along the island's spine, the old Burma Road, which is now a thin track tread by deer, the lush vegetation of summer has given way to a spare landscape of beach heather, seaside goldenrod and pitch pines. Exposed, the island yields up animal bones and other bits of natural history. There are also artifacts of past human settlement: lumps of coal, antique bottles, a post marking cable laid by Bell System, until 1984 the nation's biggest telephone company.

"We're still walking in history," said Justine Stefanelli, an interpretive ranger who leads educational nature hikes at Fire Island National Seashore.

On an icy December morning Stefanelli, 23, led nine hardy hikers out to the frost-covered boardwalk at the National Park Service's visitor center, just west of the parking lot at Smith Point County Park. Their mission: a seven-mile round-trip trek to Bellport Beach, a privately owned strip of sand that runs from the bay side to the ocean, bisecting New York's only federally designated wilderness area.

Spotting wildlife

It was 35 degrees, not the most inviting weather for a six-hour hike. But late fall and winter offer unique opportunities to spot wildlife that spend the warmer months either hidden in the underbrush or feeding elsewhere, Stefanelli said.

Seals rest on the beach. Whales pass by offshore, their spouts flashing like ships' masts that abruptly vanish.

Hikers can see rust-colored foxes flicker across the sand. And snowy owls, which breed in the Arctic, often come here for the winter. They dine on voles and other rodents at the Otis Pike Wilderness Area.

As the group set off west, Cathie Harris, 55, a seasoned trekker from Blue Point, talked excitedly about the snowy owl nest she came across last winter. The birds visit here with some regularity, but 2009 was a banner year for such sightings in New York State, according to the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

"We're always looking out for snowy owls," said hiker Joseph Van Emmerik, 18, of Shirley.

A Suffolk County Community College student, Van Emmerik also volunteers at Fire Island National Seashore. He likes the subtle beauty of the tangle of scrub and dunes in the interior of the 1,380-acre wilderness area.

This time of year the gently rolling hills are a wash of gold and gray dotted with red cedars and low-growing lichen. Beach plums sprout from sand. Naked thickets of poison ivy, stripped of its vibrant leaves by the winter chill, stand treelike and unrecognizable. "It almost feels like you're in a savanna, a grassland," said Stefanelli.

There was a touch of holiday, too - small clumps of red holly berries, and the tiny, white fruit of bayberry trees. Crushed, the hard globes gave off a festive, piney scent.

Cold-weather benefits

Another benefit of this time of year: It was too cold for deer ticks or mosquitoes, the twin banes of Fire Island summers.

Closer to the bay the ground grew moist. Waist-high grass brushed the hikers as they rounded the back side of a salt marsh by Old Inlet. Across the water came the regular pop-pop of shotguns from hunters in pursuit of ducks on the Great South Bay.

After a quick walk to the dock, Stefanelli led the hikers back across the island to the ocean side. Windblown red silica particles formed a fish-scale pattern on the white of the primary dune. Underfoot, the fine sand crunched like cold sugar.

"Keep your eyes open for whale spouts," Stefanelli said.

The group duly squinted at the waves as they tramped over tracks left by fishermen's vehicles. No spouts appeared, and the shifting sand made for heavy going, not unlike a long session on an elliptical trainer.

At last, the pavilion at what residents of Bellport Village, who own the land, call Ho-Hum Beach came in sight. The group pulled out bag lunches and ate while Stefanelli explained the Seashore's camping policy, which requires walking your gear in either a half mile from the ferry dock or a mile and a half from the entrance to the wilderness near Smith Point County Park.

"So is anyone thinking about camping here now?" she said.

"Not if I have to carry everything in," said Dan Apsel, 58, of Middle Island, a relatively new convert to hiking.

Thus far the hike had offered precious little actual wildlife, save for a blue heron and a northern harrier wheeling overhead. But the post-lunch walk back through the wilderness was fairly littered with secondhand evidence of Fire Island's animal inhabitants.

There were fox scat and deer tracks. Threading through the brush, Frank Bergin of Shirley stumbled on a clean, white bone about nine inches long. Stefanelli said it likely belonged to a baby deer.

Other finds: the back entrance to a fox den, an empty eggshell from a vulpine meal and a clump of soft white feathers, the closest the hikers came to a live owl that day.

On their return to the parking lot for Smith Point County Park, Steve and Sheila Taub of Plainview ran into the biggest wildlife find of the day: several deer grazing on the shoulder of the road. The Taubs stopped on the pavement, transfixed by a Long Island scene as timeless as any from the wilderness itself.

The next winter wilderness hikes will be on Feb. 12, Feb. 19 and Feb. 26. See the Fire Island National Seashore website at [www.nps.gov/fiis](http://www.nps.gov/fiis) for times and hike distances.