

A winter's walk on Assateague Island

"I was surprised when I suddenly felt
an overwhelming sense of serenity.
Complaints of the cold weather
quickly vanished..." (excerpt)



By Stephen Rusiniak

I'd never visited Assateague Island during the winter months. For me, a trip to the island was a summer experience, synonymous with me lounging in a sand chair—a cold beer in my hand while basking in the warmth of the sun. I'd halfheartedly be watching the tips of my twin surf poles for signs of a bite as the salty-sweet-smelling breeze blowing in from the ocean intermingled with the scent of my Panama Jack suntan lotion.

Summers on the island would inevitably have to include the crowds—my fellow sun worshipers, lugging their umbrellas and blankets, their coolers and chairs; all vying to claim their own sandy little piece of blanket-covered real estate near the water. And, of course, it's like this every day, until summer's over, and then not again until next year.

It was just after Christmas when I decided to cross the bridge linking the island to the mainland and to take a walk on the beach. Not surprisingly, when I pulled into the National Park lot, it was empty.

So too was the beach. There were no blankets or beach balls, boogie boards or bathers. All was quiet now—save for the sounds of the waves pounding the shore and the calls of a lone gull hoping to become the recipient of some tossed treat. It was cold, and so was I. It wasn't summer. I found the scene depressing, until suddenly, it wasn't.

I began to notice the brilliance of the bright blue skies and the undisturbed beauty of the wind-leveled evenness of the sands approaching the sea—except, of course, where the incoming tide had yet to wash away the sole set of footprints paralleling the water's edge, the result of my own booted feet.

Standing there alone, I was surprised when I suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of serenity. Complaints of the cold weather quickly vanished as I began walking along the beach. And for a while, it was glorious, but when the chilly air did finally begin to permeate my layers of clothing, I reluctantly walked back to my truck and headed home.

I've been back to Assateague for many more winter walks. I've found such pleasure in exploring the island—especially in walking The Life of the Dunes, Forest and Marsh trails, and in discovering the remnants of a planned development project that was forever halted by a hurricane in 1962. And the winter—it's become my favorite time of year for island exploration.

Even off season, Assateague remains a paradise, and for a guy who's not even lounging on the beach in a sand chair, that's quite an admission!

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the backstory:

The idea of even being on a beach in anything but warm weather, for me anyway, was just unheard of. And even though we visit our home in West Ocean City, Maryland throughout the year, a trip to the island and particularly to the water's edge was never part of the program—that is until one cold winter day, well you know, the one I wrote about!

Since then, it has become, again for me, the best time of the year to hike the island; to explore the areas that were almost developed some fifty-plus years ago—that is until a hurricane in the early 1960s washed away those plans—and much of what had already been built. Strolling the island in the winter is blissfully solitary—unless you bring along your hiking buddy (which is okay so long as she dresses for the weather). And maybe best of all—hiking this time of year is mosquito free—if you've ever been in the Assateague salt marshes and pine forests during the warmer weather you know what I mean!

A winter's walk on Assateague Island was first published in the Daily Times—a regional newspaper serving the Delmarva region and later went on to appear in several other Gannett-owned newspapers as well.



One more photo from that cold and blustery day and just after the water washed away my lone set of foot-prints

TIDES

WATERWAYS

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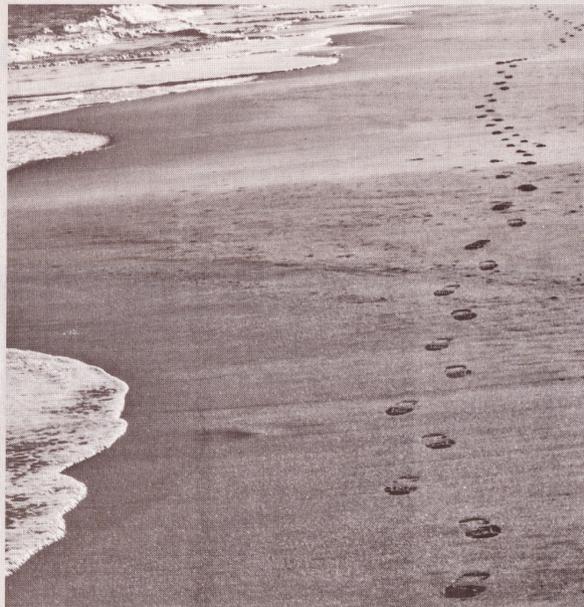
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Stephen Rusiniak lives in Wayne, N.J., and West Ocean City.



A solitary set of footprints lines the seashore on a winter day at Assateague Island. SUBMITTED IMAGE BY STEPHEN RUSINIAK