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Water, Sand and Plenty of Elbow Room on 8 Wild, Protected Coastlines

From California to Cape Cod, these national seashores and lakeshores offer everything from bird-watching to boating to basking in the sun.

The grandmother of American conservation, [Mardy Murie](#), once called the national parks our “best idea.” And this year, with foreign travel all but canceled, some of these celebrated domestic destinations have reached new heights of jam-packed popularity — and that, of course, presents challenges during a pandemic.

Despite the breathing room offered by the Great Outdoors, many of the 419 National Park Service areas have sites that are not conducive to social distancing. Many parks concentrate the public along narrow trails leading to crowded geysers, waterfalls, wildlife-viewing stands or other scenic vistas.

Yet there are notable exceptions. In particular, 13 national seashores and lakeshores offer a completely different experience. While these federally protected coastlines collectively attract millions of visitors each year, the primary attraction is water and uncrowded stretches of sand that invite picnics, water activities and social distancing.

During the pandemic, many of the visitor centers, museums, historic buildings and signature lighthouses have remained closed to the public.

The plan, according to the [National Park Service's administrative history](#) about the seashore surveys of the 1930s, was to protect natural locations for “beachcombing, surf bathing, swimming at protected beaches, surf and sport fishing, bird-watching, nature study, and visits to historic structures.”

First on the roster, in 1937, was [Cape Hatteras National Seashore](#): 70 miles along North Carolina's Outer Banks, including three lighthouses (the site wasn't formally dedicated until 1958). Prompted by burgeoning development along the coastlines after World War II, Congress added nine more national seashores to the Park Service in 10 different states, along with four national lakeshores in three states surrounding the Great Lakes (Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore was recently changed to [a national park](#)). Today these 13 expanses of lake and sea shorelines protect 809,000 acres, abutting thousands of miles of oceans and lakes.

The principal focus of the seashores and lakeshores is recreation. Many of the sites also allow off-road vehicles and sport hunting — activities that are forbidden in national parks. And while the heat of summer makes these wild shores ideal destinations, most can also be explored throughout the fall and winter.

From California to Cape Cod, here are eight of the most scenic seashores and lakeshores in the National Park Service.



Cape Lookout National Seashore

Directly south of the often-congested Cape Hatteras, N.C., the scantily visited, 56-mile-long Cape Lookout National Seashore bridges three unspoiled barrier islands: North and South Core Banks and Shackleford Banks. Less than half a million people made brief visits last year. Home to wild horses, nesting loggerhead turtles and countless shorebirds, this undeveloped seashore is accessible only by boat, with no roads or stores. Primitive cabins can be rented on the South Core Banks, while camping is allowed throughout the seashore. The Cape Lookout Lighthouse is closed until further notice.

Otherwise, surf-casting is popular, along with hunting, shell collecting, windsurfing, kayaking, motor boating (like most national seashores, areas for personal watercraft and Jet Skis are limited), long beach strolls and four-wheel driving on the two Core islands (scheduled ferries transport motor vehicles).